

**BYZANTINE LARISA AND ITS REGION  
FROM THE 6TH CENTURY TO 1204**

George A. Koulouras

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
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**A thesis submitted for the degree of**

**Master of Philosophy**

**by George A. Koulouras**

**October 1994**

**Department of Mediaeval History**

**University of St Andrews**



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**ABSTRACT**

The mediaeval town of Larisa and its immediate vicinity -the most important part of Thessaly- in central Greece have been generally viewed as one of the most remote and underdeveloped areas within the Byzantine Empire. By the examination of the sources under a new light and the exploitation of new archaeological evidence the present thesis challenges this traditional view and attempts to highlight the key role which Larisa played as one of the most prominent administrative and ecclesiastical centres in Greece. Chapter One deals with the invasions of the Slavs in the Thessalian territory during the 6th-7th centuries, their subsequent settlements and their final absorption in the Byzantine state through their hellenization and Christianisation. Chapter Two examines the changes within local society after the passing of the Dark Ages, and considers the fate of the town during the temporary Arab threat, and the invasions of Symeon and Samuel in the course of the 10th century. Chapter Three focuses on the important administrative changes, the architectural renaissance in the region of Ossa, the Thessalian revolt of 1066 and the presence of the Vlachs as a distinct ethnic group. Chapter Four gives the clearest possible account of Alexios' I campaign in 1082 with a view to relieving Larisa from the Norman pressure. Chapter Five confirms in the region of Larisa the economic prosperity attested throughout the empire in the first three quarters of the 12th century, analyses the local administrative structures and studies the circumstances under which Larisa passed into Latin hands. Finally, Chapter Six provides a clear view of the ecclesiastical organisation of the area, attests the Bogomil threat during the 12th century, evaluates the important role of St. Achilleios' cult and summarises the monastic presence in the mountain of Kellia.

v

**To**

**My**

**Parents**

## INTRODUCTION

The mediaeval town of Larisa and its vicinity, which roughly extends to the present-day boundaries, has been traditionally viewed as one of the most prosperous areas in the Greek peninsula during the whole Byzantine period. The fertility of the surrounding plain, watered mainly by Peneios river, appears to have guaranteed the unbroken provisioning of Larisa with agricultural products and contributed to the reputation of the town as one of the richest local centres.

In the past Larisa and its district did not constitute the subject of a comprehensive study but they were examined collectively together with the other parts of Thessaly. Avramea wrote a historical geography of Thessaly with strong emphasis on the road network, the physical geography and the urban settlements. By the methodical use of the sources and the thorough investigation of the archaeological evidence at her disposal, she mainly succeeded in giving a clear explanation of how the physical environment and the movement of foreign-aggressive populations affected the area.

However, by classifying her material in a geographical rather than in a chronological order she inevitably left out the main trends that influenced and formed the local society and together all the local administrative, religious and mainly demographic factors that played an important role in the development of the Thessalian towns. In other words, Avramea's concentration on evaluating the role of physical geography prevented her from discerning the profound changes brought about at a provincial level during the period from the 6th to 12th centuries.

The aim of the thesis is to illustrate the position that Larisa and its vicinity held as an integral part first of Thessaly and then of the Byzantine empire. Special attention is also given to the functions that Larisa fulfilled as the capital of the Thessalian towns as well as to the way that it interacted with them. The method followed, was that of the collection and recording of the material in a rational chronological order. Its first priority being to avoid a piecemeal treatment of the

subject which could result from the adoption of strict chronological boundaries, the present thesis aspires to give satisfactory solutions in difficult problems not only of chronological but also of topographical nature. Another basic consideration throughout the period of the undertaking was the attempt at analysing with in elaborate way the historical realities that are either not cited at all in Avramea's work or treated under a different light.

A quick look at the sources makes it immediately apparent that on they whole are poor. The narrative sources were chiefly written by foreigners, often at a considerable distance from events, or by locals centuries later on the basis of oral tradition or older documents. Although there exist a considerable number of other documents, such as letters, these rarely give us the details and explanations we would like. This scarcity of references to Larisa may be attributed to the geographical position of the town given that the Greek peninsula constituted an area of secondary importance for the inhabitants of Constantinople. The little evidence for the historical development of the town can be sought in the form of scattered references in the works of the Byzantine historians and chronographs, the Saint's Lives and the documents of an ecclesiastical and administrative nature. The archaeological evidence, admirably collected in Avramea's work, is supplemented here following the disclosure of Christian basilicas in Larisa and Elassona and some new inscriptions that improve our knowledge of the big aristocratic families and the various administrative institutions. Furthermore, because of the nature of the field -the scarcity of sources encouraging a great variety of scholarly hypotheses- it has been necessary to include a certain number of discussions about the interpretations of scholars and about the sources these interpretations rest on.

Of course, a comprehensive study of the town of Larisa and its vicinity could not omit a brief reference to the general conditions that prevailed in the empire in the course of every chronological period treated here. This should be seen as aiming not at stuffing the work with useless details but at familiarising the reader with the changes that concerned or applied to the mediaeval town of Larisa.

## I. THE SLAVIC PRESENCE IN THE REGION OF LARISA

### A. The Slav invasions of 6th-7th centuries

During the 6th century, the region of Larisa together with Thessaly, was seriously affected by the frequent Slav incursions, which started at the beginning of Justinian's reign. The Slavs were organised into tribes and their society was characterised by its limited organisation into a tribal-clan level and by the lack of a grand superstructure that could unite or control them. This, in conjunction with their precarious position and their need to find more lands to settle, led them eventually to enter Byzantine territory.

No matter how remarkable Justinian's building programme may have been in securing strategic positions, the overall imperial defence system was definitely inadequate to restrain the Slav masses from ravaging extensive areas of Illyricum and taking booty and prisoners, before going back home, north of the Danube where they felt more safe and secure.

The fertility of the Thessalian plain, described by Procopius in his *Buildings* attracted for the first time the Slavs in 540, when they reached and even attempted to besiege without success the well fortified narrow pass of Thermopylai.<sup>1</sup> This attack, is subsequently confirmed by Agathias -Procopius' continuator- in his *Historia* though he calls the invaders Huns.<sup>2</sup> In 559 Agathias mentions another similar attack, this time by the Coutrigur Bulgars, who possibly included amongst their ranks a considerable number of Slavs.<sup>3</sup>

The common element of these attacks was the failure of the Slavs-Bulgars to pass beyond the stronghold of Thermopylai, something which shows that a dividing line had been drawn across Thermopylai leaving in effect the areas to the north exposed to the enemy. This is explained by the fact that Thermopylai together with the Isthmus

<sup>1</sup> Procopius, *Buildings*, iv, iii, 7, 242; idem *Bello Persico*, ii, 4, 10-11, 289

<sup>2</sup> Agathias, 8

<sup>3</sup> Agathias, 194

of Corinth were extremely well fortified due to their key strategic position in the defence of southern Greece and Peloponnesos.

Nevertheless, the 18 strongholds in Thessaly cited by Procopius both in his regular narrative and in his list provided safe isles of refuge to the local, rural population every time a Slav invasion broke out.<sup>4</sup> Caesarea and Elassona (Λοσσών, according to Procopius) in the northwest of Thessaly and the coastal fortress of Eurymene in the northeast appeared to have been destined to guard the narrow passages of the secondary routes which the Slavs might have followed in their descent towards southern Greece, i.e. the pass of 'Porta' between Kamvounia and Titaros mountains, the pass of 'Petra' between Titaros and Olympos, and the pass near modern Agia, between Ossa and Maurovounio. Larisa and Pharsala, situated in the centre of Thessaly, dominated their fertile surroundings that were watered by rivers Peneios and Enipeus respectively.<sup>5</sup> It is highly likely that these major cities constituted in this early period the backbone of the defensive system in Thessaly as the majority of the population was probably gathered inside their fortifications. They were also the centres from which small-scale operations aimed at the relief of the surrounding area from the Slavs could be launched. Eventually, the cities in the western part of Thessaly (Trikke, Gomphoi, Metropolis) offered a shelter to the local population when the Slavs swarmed through the Pindus mountain range, while the coastal cities (Demetrias, Thebes, Echinon) and fortresses (Kentauropolis, Eurymene) of the eastern part, acquired a very strategic role due to the physical protection which the Aegean sea could provide them.

A distinction should be made here between the 'πόλεις' and 'φρούρια' mentioned by Procopius. 'Πόλεις' (towns) have to be seen as permanent settlements with a certain administrative, economic, and ecclesiastical status whereas 'φρούρια' (fortresses) may be described as simple, rough defensive constructions operating only in cases of

<sup>4</sup> Procopius, *Buildings*, iv.iii.1-iv.iii.15, 241-245; *ibid*, iv.iv.

<sup>5</sup> In the valley of Enipeus the major agricultural settlements are attested in the plain whereas the major fortified centres were situated on the hilly-mountainous areas. Decourt, 'Enipeus', 40



emergency.<sup>6</sup> A dispersed local population in sparsely populated provinces like Thessaly could easily and above all quickly find a shelter in these constructions which might well have covered the whole Thessalian plain.

It is exactly this temporary character that makes it difficult to identify most of the fortresses which Procopius names (Alkon, Gerontike, Pervila, Skidreous, Phrakella).<sup>7</sup> After the passing of the great Slav threat in the middle of the 7th century most of these constructions presumably lost their importance, as they no longer served the purpose for which they were built -or restored- by Justinian during 527-550 and their place-names survived only in the cases where they were replaced by new towns or settlements like Elassona.

We do not have any authoritative information concerning the armed forces that the thessalian cities had at their disposal. However, we can draw some useful conclusions from the Miracles of St. Demetrios, a hagiographical text written during the 7th century and referring among other things to the repeated sieges which the city of Thessalonica suffered from the Slavs during the 6th and 7th centuries.

Archbishop John, the author of the passage which is of interest to us, in his attempt to highlight the desperate position of Thessalonica during a siege in 586, gives us a good idea of how the army of the cities was articulated:

"The biggest part of the selected youths serving both in the (regular) army and the great praetorium, together with the eparch, who exercises the power, happened to be away in the region of the Hellenes due to public matters; and the elite of the remaining, who are rich in terms of money, wisdom and slaves and who know well how to fight, and hold the major positions in the office of the praetorium went to Constantinople with a lot of their friends and all their retinue to make a complaint to the emperor against the one who has the power here (eparch)."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dagron, 'Villes', *Villes*, 7-8

<sup>7</sup> Avramea tries to identify Kerkineou with Palaikastron in the road Larisa-Demetrias without giving any reasoning, Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 112

<sup>8</sup> Miracles, I, 137

From this report we can clearly distinguish three major reserves of resistance that the Byzantine cities could line up against the Slav menace: <sup>9</sup> i) the soldiers of the regular imperial army (*στρατιωτικόν*). Since they were sent elsewhere most of the time (particularly to the Persian front), only a few were available in Greece. ii) the soldiers who were under the command of the eparch of Illyricum (*τῶν ἐν τῷ μεγίστῳ στρατευομένων πραιτωρίῳ*). They possibly did not exist in Larisa, as the town was located far away from Thessalonica, and iii) the well equipped and skilled slaves who were fighting under the command of their lords/owners of extended agricultural lands; these landowners were probably entrusted with the coordination of defence during periods of emergency and especially after the autonomy which the cities were granted as a result of Justinian's reforms in 535.

However, well-trained municipal garrisons -the so-called 'civil militia'- had the lion's share in the defence of their city. These garrisons were supported and encouraged during their struggle -as when Thessalonica was besieged by the Avaro-Slavs in 618- by their bishop, the representative of God and empowered in this particular period with exceptional competences. <sup>10</sup> Larisa could undoubtedly rely for an effective defense on the last two categories of soldiers: the slaves, who were working in the surrounding fertile areas under the employment of landowners and the energetic citizens who realized that they had to take the salvation of their city into their own hands as the imperial government had proved incapable of sending any auxiliary troops. This speculation about the defence of the town is further supported by the fact that northern Illyricum, one traditional recruiting area for the empire, had almost been devoid of troops even before the Ostrogothic war.

Towards the end of Justinian's reign the abrupt Slav invasions ceased to occur for almost two decades, as the emperor took additional measures for the strengthening of the limes of the Danube and managed to play the barbarian tribes off against one

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<sup>9</sup> Dagron, 'Villes', *Villes*, 18-19, apparently mistranslating the text adds a fourth category of troops: the selected youngers who were recruited locally and were in charge of defending the fortifications, the guilds and the demes; *Miracles* II, 71

<sup>10</sup> *Miracles*, I, 186-187

another.<sup>11</sup> This peaceful gap though was not to last for long as the predominance of the powerful Avar federation in the scene north of the Danube marked a new era in the relations between the Slavs and the Byzantine empire.<sup>12</sup> The Slavs now, intimidated by the notorious personality of the chagan Baian, and motivated by their intense need for deserted and fallow land for cultivation were made to force their way towards Greece.<sup>13</sup>

Every time the contemporary Byzantine authors refer to the destination of that descent they use the word 'Hellas', which according to Charanis covered the area south of Thermopylai including the Peloponnesus;<sup>14</sup> given the fact that the Slavs were usually following the traditional Roman routes, we can take it for granted that they made their passage through Thessaly. In their attempt they were encouraged by the fertility of the lands in central and southern Greece and by the absence of an organised army capable of providing any essential counter attack, or even repulsing operations.

This second wave of Slav invasions began with a plundering in Thessaly and Greece dated back to 578 and recorded by the contemporary historian Menander Protector. In his account Menander stresses Tiberius weakness to organise an army to confront them.<sup>15</sup> But before Thessaly could get over this first shock a second invasion occurred in 581. John of Ephesus writes: "In the third year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius (581) the accursed Slavs invaded the empire, traversed all Greece, pillaged Thrace and Thessaly, took many towns and fortified places and settled into the country as though it were their own. This went on for four years (581-584) during which time they moved about as they liked."<sup>16</sup> This invasion has been also attested by the discovery of coin hoards in Thebes (Boeotic), Corinth, Kenchreiai, Nemea, Argos, Arcadia and Olympia but not in the region of Thessaly.<sup>17</sup> This of course can not be taken as a proof that Larisa escaped the common fate of other Greek towns. Further

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<sup>11</sup> Agathias, 197

<sup>12</sup> Whitby, *Maurice*, 145-151

<sup>13</sup> Malingoudis, *Slavoi*, 17-44.

<sup>14</sup> Charanis, "*Hellas*", 161-176.

<sup>15</sup> Menander, fr. 21 192

<sup>16</sup> John of Ephesus, vi, 25.; Olajos, '*Contributions*', 506-515

<sup>17</sup> Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, '*Les Slaves*', 348

excavations must be carried out if we want to shed more light on the accounts of the geographically remote Byzantine authors. The invasions of 578-580 and 581-584 strained the resources of all the Thessalian cities and rendered them incapable of putting up a sturdy resistance to the Slav onslaught that took place two years later. The new invasion was accelerated by Comentiolus' (Maurice's general) success against the Slavs in Adrianople in 584 and by the construction, in the same area, of a ditch that was used as a protective shield for the capital and its immediate hinterland. In 586 the additional absence of an effective mobile army permitted the Avaro-Slavs to exercise a heavy pressure on Thessalonica. In spite of their failure to capture the city they succeeded in establishing their first, though temporary, settlements and quickly gained control of the whole area.<sup>18</sup> The imperial government showed itself incapable of reacting, sending in this way to the provincial towns the message that their fate was in their own hands. Whitby has argued that "only a united and well organized city with sound defences could survive years of pressure" and Larisa as we will prove further down was one of them.<sup>19</sup> This was not the case, however, for the other Thessalian cities. Describing the dramatic conditions that prevailed in Thessalonica the Miracles record the existence of Thessalians amongst the besieged population of the city.<sup>20</sup> This information suggests that either their towns had been abandoned since 584 as they proved inadequate to secure them against the imminent Slav incursions, or that a group of the Slavs who laid siege against Thessalonica in 586 had attacked Thessaly just a few months earlier. This second hypothesis seems to be closer to the reality. If we take into account the mention in the Miracles, that the eparch of Illyricum had gone with a considerable military force to the region of the Hellenes due to 'civil affairs', we can suggest that these affairs had been the relief of Thessaly, southern Greece and Peloponnesus from the invaders and the restoration of

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<sup>18</sup> Miracles, I, xiii-xv

<sup>19</sup> Whitby, *Maurice*, 178

<sup>20</sup> Miracles, I, 137: "εἰ γὰρ μὴ μόνον τοὺς Μακεδόνας ἀπαντας ἀλλὰ καὶ Θεσσαλοὺς καὶ Ἀχαιοὺς ὑποθεῖτο τις σωρηδὸν ἐν Θεσσαλονίκῃ τῇνικαῦτα συνηθροισμένους οὐδὲ πολλοστὸν μέρος τῶν ἐξῶθεν περιστοιχισάντων τὴν πόλιν ἐτύγχανον"

Byzantine authority.<sup>21</sup> The devastation which these invasions brought about is confirmed by two contemporary sources: the Chronicle of Monemvasia and the Ecclesiastical history of Euagrius.<sup>22</sup> Ferjancic believes that the two accounts refer to the same event on the ground of Euagrius' note that the invasion which he describes occurred before 591.<sup>23</sup>

No matter what their status was between 586-614,<sup>24</sup> in 614 innumerable masses of Slavs inundated not only the mainland of Thessaly (among the Slav tribes mentioned are the Velegezitai who later came to settle in Thessaly) and Greece proper but also the surrounding islands of the Sporades and Kyklades, on account of the fact that they had developed advanced naval skills.<sup>25</sup> Their 'μονόξυλα' overwhelmed the Aegean and caused a serious disruption in the economic life of the empire. The impact of this Slav flood was so immense, that Isidore of Seville, wrote in his chronicle that in the fourth year of Heraclius' reign (614) "the Slavs took Greece from the Romans."<sup>26</sup> Amongst the regions of Greece most affected by the Slav invasions was without any doubt Thessaly. In Thebes (mod. Nea Anchialos), once a great ecclesiastical centre, no coin dated later than the reign of Heraclius was found. The incursion of 614 was the last and perhaps the most critical attack that was ever launched by the Slavs in Thessaly. Almost sixty years later, in 678, during a siege of Thessalonika, the Velegezitai had already settled around Pagasitic Gulf and were cultivating their lands. The sources during this sixty-year period do not make any mention of the Thessalian cities, a fact that leads us to conclude that they were in a desperate state in accordance

<sup>21</sup> Miracles, I, 137

<sup>22</sup> Kalligas, *Byzantine Monemvasia*, 8: "ἐν ἑτέρᾳ δὲ εἰσβολῇ ἐχειρώσατο πᾶσαν τὴν Θεσσαλίαν καὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα πᾶσαν"; Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical history*, vi, 10, 228: "...καὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα πᾶσαν καὶ ἑτέρας πόλεις καὶ φρούρια ἐξεπολιόρκησαν καὶ ἡνδραποδίσαντο ἀπολύντες ἅπαντας καὶ πυρπολοῦντες"

<sup>23</sup> Ferjancic, 'Invasions', *Villes*, 100-101

<sup>24</sup> Miracles II, 182-185; Lemerle expressed the view that the Slavs after 586 were already firmly settled in Macedonia, continental Greece, whereas Whitby, *Maurice*, 120-121 doubting the dating of the Slav raid against Thessalonika [I, 12] in 586 believes that they were no major settlements before the 7th century and Pelekidou, 'Les Slaves', 350 goes further by noting that a little after the invasion of 586 the Slavs returned to the north.

<sup>25</sup> Miracles, I, 175

<sup>26</sup> Isidori, *Chronicon*, PL. 83, col.1056: "Eraclius dehinc quintum agit annum imperii Cuius Initio Sclavi Graeciam plurimasque provincias". Serious objections about the value of this information have been expressed by Charanis, 'Observations', 19

with the general condition which prevailed in the Balkans. We should bear in mind that in the 480's the passage of the Ostrogoths from the Thessalian towns had definitely altered their character and any attempt that had been made to restore their old glory was abandoned from the middle of the 6th century. From this point onwards they had been suffering several blows which made them more vulnerable to any external threat. Firstly, the Slav invasion of 540 that clearly had a booty-taking character terrified the citizens who had not experienced anything similar in the past and shifted the activities of the city towards defensive directions. The cities started to shrink and they lost both their previous size and glory as well as the intense public life held in the baths and the theatres. A militarization of society was in progress and Procopius' accusations towards Justinian concerning his orders to reduce public spectacles reflect the imperial concern to secure the cities.<sup>27</sup> Larisa must have felt the consequences of this process more profoundly than the other Thessalian cities as the discovery of an ancient theatre on the fringe of the citadel of the mediaeval town implies a vivid social life. Secondly, the bubonic plague which broke out in 541-542 and stormed all the empire did not cease before the end of the 6th century. It decimated the indigenous rural population of Greece and rendered the cultivation of land problematic, the production of agricultural foodstuffs lower, and life in the cities harder. Thirdly, the earthquake of 552 which caused extensive damage. Lastly the decay of local institutions to the profit of a group of powerful citizens -in the case of Larisa perhaps of the great landowners- who sometimes instigated by their own interests operated independently to the disadvantage of their own town as was the case at Thessalonika in 675.<sup>28</sup> Moreover a gradual decline of the administrative structures cut off the cities from the imperial capital.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Procopius, *Secret History*, 158

<sup>28</sup> Miracles, I, 211: Dagron, 'Villes', *Villes*, 10-19

<sup>29</sup> Miracles, II, 176; Lemerle notes that the praetorium of Illirycum with Thessalonika as capital was replaced by the praetorium of Thessalonika because it was the only town which could exercise power for much time.



## B. The Slav Settlements

The invasions at the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century brought the Slavs firmly established in the region of Thessaly. Nevertheless, both the archaeological evidence and the scattered references in the works of the contemporary historians concerning the general condition in Greece permit us to suggest a continuance of a civilized life in the city throughout the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries.

The surrounding countryside of Larisa was largely Slavic but the city managed to survive the turbulence of the 580's and remained Roman. The letters which Pope Gregory (590-604) addressed to John, bishop of Larisa prove the case.<sup>30</sup> They cover a period of seven years beginning in October 592 and ending in May 599. Although the Pope was well informed about the Slav movements in the Balkans (as shown by the letters which he addressed to the bishops of north Illyricum in 591) he did not make any allusion to an alleged occupation of Thessaly during these critical years; on the contrary, his main concern was to rebuke John for his arbitrary decision to depose the bishop of Thebes, Adrian. Amongst the letters which Gregory addressed to the Greek bishops, one has great historical value as it highlights the conditions in Greece in roughly the same period. In this letter, addressed to the bishop of Corinth, Gregory asks him to facilitate the trip of his representatives to Constantinople by providing them either with a ship or with the necessary equipment for a land journey. Had the main land routes leading to Constantinople -and certainly passing through Larisa- been swarming with Slavs, the Pope would not have endangered the lives of his representatives. Therefore, it becomes obvious that a little time after the Slav invasion of 580-590 the way to Thessalonica was open and that the only obstacles that the Pope anticipated might cause problems to the trip of his representative, arose from the adverse weather conditions and not from the Slav invasions. On this ground we can safely suggest that at least during 590/591 the fortresses that were situated close to the road Corinth-Thessalonica, and therefore Larisa were firmly held by the

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<sup>30</sup> Pope Gregory, *Registrum Epistolarum*, *MGH Epistolae*, I (iii 6, iii 7) II (viii 10, ix 156)

Byzantines.<sup>31</sup> The continuance of life in Thessaly (at least until the beginning of the 7th century) is also confirmed by the fact that further east, in the coastal Thebes (mod. N. Anchialos) a hoard with Constantinopolitan coins was found. These coins can not be dated earlier than 612-615, i.e. a little before or simultaneously with the major Slav invasion of 614. According to Metcalf "the occurrence of coastal hoards reflecting sums of money that were withdrawn, apparently, from the currency of regions other than those in which they were concealed is a clear pointer to the extent of sea traffic in the Aegean region in the early 7th century";<sup>32</sup> such a sea traffic apparently involved a maritime trade operating during the critical period 586-614 between the capital and Thessaly. This trade entailed agricultural products which were drawn from the interior of Thessaly -most possibly from the immediate surroundings of Larisa where agricultural labour was conducted under more favourable circumstances- and dispatched to the capital.

It appears that no major Slav settlements were solidly established in central and southern Greece earlier than the beginning of the 7th century, a conclusion which arises from the absence of coin hoards in the same areas during the period 586-609, the letters of Pope Gregory to the Greek bishops in 591 and the great campaigns of Maurice in the same year intending to reorganize the limes of the Danube.<sup>33</sup> So, after the Slavs overran Thessaly and Greece for a few years after 586, they returned back north leaving behind them only a few dispersed groups, the majority of them being located in the mountainous areas.

The Miracles of St. Demetrios mention amongst the various Slavic groups that overwhelmed Greece in 614 the tribe of Velegezitai.<sup>34</sup> They soon managed to establish a 'Sklavinia' in the Thessalian territory and under the leadership of a local chief (ῥηγ, ἑξάρχος, ἀρχων in the Byzantine sources) they operated independently from the other Slav tribes, that were settled in Macedonia and Peloponnesus. The

<sup>31</sup> Kordoses, 'Slavike Epoikese', 400

<sup>32</sup> Metcalf, 'Aegean coastlands', 14-23

<sup>33</sup> Pelekidou, 'Les Slaves', 346-352

<sup>34</sup> Miracles, 175



references to their activities, and the relations they developed with the Thessalians are extremely scarce but the sources which refer in a general way to 'Hellas' or 'theme of Hellas' -of which Thessaly was a vital part- show that the Velegezitae were soon pacified. Nevertheless, the Velegezitae, as usually happens with tribes which are settled in a new totally strange territory, caused certain disruption roughly from 614, the date of their invasion, until the foundation of the theme of Hellas and the restoration of imperial order at the end of the 7th century. This was the time which the Slavs needed to consolidate their settlements, become familiar with the local Christian population's usages and realize that the co-operation with them could pave the way to their own prosperity. Therefore, it would be inappropriate -at least for the case of the Velegezitae- to suggest that the Slav settlements in Greece should be mainly seen as a "peaceful, gradual infiltration of a numerable ethnological element."<sup>35</sup>

Several incidents during this period suggest that they were if not aggressive at least wary of the Greeks. In 675, during a siege of Thessalonica by the Sagoudatoi, Rynchinoi, and Strymonitai Slavs the assembly of the notables of the town was desperate to find a right solution in order to relieve the citizens from imminent famine. They decided on the immediate dispatch of all the ships at their disposal to the "region of Thebes and Demetrias." Their crews were detailed to buy from the "nation of the Velegezitae" the corn and legume supplies which were badly needed in Thessalonica. <sup>36</sup> This incident has permitted scholars to postulate that regular commercial exchanges had been developed between the Byzantines and the Slav newcomers. <sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the same narrative contains further down three pieces of evidence which prove that this was not the case:

- i) Only the feeble population remained behind in the city, charged with the task to protect the walls against the siege engines that the Slavs might have used in order to

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<sup>35</sup> Malingoudis, *'Slavoi'*, 25

<sup>36</sup> Miracles, I, 214

<sup>37</sup> Pelekidou, *'Les Slaves'*, 354-355

storm the city, ii) the Anonymous author of the narrative is not sure about the relationship between the Thessalonians and the Velegezitae. He uses the word "δοκεῖν" (=seems, appears) which denotes only his impression or the impression of his fellow-citizens on the matter, iii) when the condition of the city deteriorated and the citizens were demoralized, they started expressing their deep concern about the fate of the soldiers, sent to the region of the Velegezitae, reckoning that they would be massacred once the news about the capture of Thessalonica reached the region of the Pagasitic Gulf. The anonymous author himself (I, 216) admits that the Velegezitai would surely have assassinated them if St. Demetrius had not prevented the capture of the city.

If the relations of Velegezitae with the Thessalonians had been so amiable in order to justify a regular exchange of products, the latter would never have sent their best troops to a routine mission weakening their defence, particularly when their town was pressured by siege. Of course there is always the possibility that the anonymous author invented this literary 'trick' -a commonplace in the Miracles- in order to exaggerate the danger and thus magnify the divine intercession of Thessalonica's patron saint. However, the ambiguity which characterises the account of the event by the Anonymous and his uncertainty regarding the outcome of the relief mission and the fate of his fellow-citizens in the hands of the Velegezitae is indicative of the instability which governed the relationships between the Greeks and the Velegezitae Slavs. The Thessalonians, being in a desperate position could turn for help neither to the imperial government which appeared to their eyes as a distant power nor to their neighbourhood which had been overrun by the various Slav tribes. Therefore, their decision to appeal for help to the Velegezitae, has to be seen as a movement directed by their critical position and not as a sign of regular commercial transactions with them in the last quarter of the 7th century. Apart from all the above, the incident also reveals that the Velegezitae had firmly taken up the cultivation of land in Thessaly, most likely under the tolerance -without the approval- of the local Byzantine authority which was based in Larisa. They certainly did not form any nation (ἔθνος) since they

could not have national consciousness and lacked any institution of central government; therefore the use of that word by the Anonymous has rather a vague meaning.

The Velegezitae did not restrict their aggressive operations to the mainland of Thessaly. It seems that they were also skilful seamen. According to the Miracles (I, 179) in 614 they occupied the Northern Sporades (*καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν Θεσσαλίαν καὶ τὰς περὶ αὐτὴν νήσους*). Some time before 665 (Miracles II, 6) according to Lemerle, they captured the ship which transported the bishop of Thenai (in Africa) Kyprianos to Constantinople: "*καὶ τοῖς τῆς Ἑλλάδος μέρεσι πλησιάσας, ἐκ τῶν ἀνημέρων σύλληπται Σλάβων*".<sup>38</sup> The term *Hellas* in that period covered an extended geographical area, as it still included Peloponnesos. However, the ship was surely captured further north in the open sea off Euboia or Thessaly because the coastline in the east part of Peloponnesos was clear of Slavs -according to the Chronicle of Monemvasia- and therefore would have provided a reasonable security to the ship of Kyprianos. Moreover, the Slav naval power was restricted to the north Aegean sea, as further south, the theme of Carabisiani, founded in the middle of the 7th century, protected the main sea routes and secured free shipping.<sup>39</sup> In 682-683, the Byzantine general Sisinnios in his way to Thessalonica stopped at the island of Skiathos which had not been inhabited for a long period of time.<sup>40</sup> The desertion of the island resulted from the Slav invasion of 614 and corroborates our suggestion that the Slavs were able to harass the sea communication in the north Aegean sea for the most part of the 7th century.

The Velegezitae, beyond any question disrupted the normal life in Thessaly for a few decades. Haldon remarks that "the number of punitive expeditions mounted by the emperors in the last third of the 7th century suggests that imperial control can have been neither very great nor at all secure".<sup>41</sup> In the case of the Velegezitai, the only

<sup>38</sup> Miracles, I, 216

<sup>39</sup> Antoniadis-Bibicou, *Etudes*, 80

<sup>40</sup> Miracles, I, 296: "*Προσορμήσας οὖν ἐν τῇ λεχθείσῃ νήσῳ, ἀουκίτῳ οὖσῃ ἐκ πλείστων τῶν χρόνων*"; Charanis, 'Kouver', 237-238

<sup>41</sup> Haldon, *Byzantium in the 7th century*, 66

campaign launched against them seems to have had only temporary success : in 662 Constans II (641-668) passed through Thessaly in order to visit Athens where he spent the winter of 662-663. Judging by the campaign he launched against the Slavs in Strymon-Rodope region in 658 his intention was to pacify the Slavs that were settled on his way (the Velegezitai amongst them) and demonstrate imperial strength. He may have even visited the Byzantine garrisons within the Thessalian plain, and assured them about his support in the difficult times they were passing through.<sup>42</sup> Constans' campaign became possible only when he took advantage of the internal difficulties of the Arab world and managed to withdraw some troops from the eastern front. This means that the emperor was always concerned at the situation and determined to give relief to the Greeks. Nonetheless in 678, the Slavs were besieging Thessalonika and, as we have already seen, the Velegezitai were equally aggressive. The absence of Larisaean bishops from the 6th Ecumenical Council in 681 and from the Concilium Quinisextum in 692, has been usually taken as a sign of the decay or even the abandonment of the town by its inhabitants who sought a safer shelter to fortified places or bigger urban centres like Thessalonika. This deduction however appears to be too hasty, after a second thought. Such an absence is to be rather explained by the unwillingness of the bishop to leave his flock behind and take unnecessary risks by travelling to Constantinople in a period that Larisa needed his guidance more than ever. Regarding the Council of 692 the Larisaean participation was rendered impossible for an additional reason: The Pope having prior knowledge of the issues that would be discussed, ordered the archbishoprics under his jurisdiction -Larisa was amongst them- to refrain from attending the Council.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> A bronze coin of his reign was found in Larisa, Berdelis, *Anaskafi Larisas*, *PAE* (1955), 147-150

<sup>43</sup> Yiannopoulos, *Métropoles du Péloponnèse*, 394

### C. The process of Pacification and Christianisation of the Slavs

The foundation of the theme of Hellas (sometime between 687-695) marked the countdown of the final pacification and absorption of the Slavs in Greece. The restoration of the Byzantine power forced the Slavs to cease their depredations. No major Byzantine campaign is mentioned during the whole 8th century, with the exception of the one which Constantine V (741-755) launched against the Slavs in Macedonia immediately after his accession to the throne, and that of Staurakios in 783 which resulted at the pacification of the few remaining recalcitrant Slavs in the extended Greek Peninsula.<sup>44</sup>

There are several incidents which lead us to believe that the Velegezitai no longer represent any longer a threat to the local population. In 727 according to Theophanes, a revolt broke out in the theme of Hellas due to the hostility of the emperor Leo III (717-741) against the veneration of icons.<sup>45</sup> The revolt was jointly headed by Stephanus and Agallianos, turmarch of the 'Helladikoi', and the rebels could deploy a considerable number of ships in order to challenge the imperial fleet outside Constantinople. The mere fact that the 'Helladikoi' could operate such a large military and naval power in order to rise in revolt against the emperor indicates that Greece and accordingly Thessaly was thriving and that the Velegezitai, if not isolated in the mountainous areas, were not only on good terms with them but also had common interests and supported their moves.

In 733, Illyricum was placed under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Constantinople as Leo III had been taught from the past that the Greek bishoprics would react vigorously to his repeated iconoclastic measures and preferred to have them by his side and not under the influence of the Pope in Rome as hitherto was the case. Stratos commenting on the decision doubts the usefulness of this transfer if the Slavs were still playing a major role in Greece thus implying a rather weak Slavic presence.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Theophanes, 430, 457

<sup>45</sup> Theophanes, 405

<sup>46</sup> Stratos, *Byzantium in the 7th century*, 175

Between 744-747 a plague broke out in Sicily and rapidly moved towards Peloponnesos, Greece, eventually affecting Constantinople itself.<sup>47</sup> This incident gave rise to the famous statement of Constantine Porphyrogenitus that the entire country was slavized.<sup>48</sup> However, a three year-period could not have been enough for the Slavs to abolish the Byzantine power and render the country barbaric. As Charanis explains this phrase must be taken to mean: "came under the domination or influence of the Slavs."<sup>49</sup> In other words the Byzantine rule disappeared (it was not replaced by a real state) and different regions remained in the hands of various Slavic groups while others presumably were left in the hands of local Greeks; very likely in some places the local Greeks continued to administer themselves, simply paying tribute to the newcomers. In 755 Constantine V ordered the transfer of whole families from Greece and the Peloponnesos in order to fill the population gap in the capital, an event which suggests that the population in Greece was relatively numerous and that the communication between the capital and the big cities in Greece (including Larisa) where the orders were conveyed, was close.<sup>50</sup> In 783, as we have seen, the empress Irene having concluded a peace with the Arabs decided on launching a campaign against the recalcitrant Slavs in Macedonia, Greece and Peloponnesos.<sup>51</sup> Though the campaign was conducted on three different fronts it had considerable success, a fact that indicates that the Slavs were by then totally incapable of resisting an organized army. Thus it becomes obvious that at least during the 8th century any Slav attacks against the Greek population aimed mainly at looting. Hostilities must have been very rare and took place every time unruly Slav groups were trying to regain the autonomy they had previously lost to the Byzantines.

Theophanes records that in 799 Akamer the chief of the Velzitai (Velegezitae?) Slavs in Greece was incited by the 'Helladikoi' to liberate the sons of Constantine V-exiled to Athens by Irene- with the hope of setting one of these last Isaurians upon their

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<sup>47</sup> Theophanes, 442-444

<sup>48</sup> Const. Porphy., *De Thematribus*, 53 ; Theophanes, 422-424

<sup>49</sup> Charanis, *Observations*, 22

<sup>50</sup> Theophanes, 429

<sup>51</sup> See above note 44



father's throne.<sup>52</sup> Niavis has recently come to identify the 'Helladikoi' with Slavs, considering the incident of Akamer as a motive which later caused Nicephorus to transfer Christians into areas densely populated by the Slavs.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless the term 'Helladikoi' in Theophanes implies the inhabitants of the Greek peninsula and after the creation of the theme of Hellas it came to be restricted to the inhabitants of that theme and certainly not exclusively to the Slavs.<sup>54</sup> Moreover the repugnance which Theophanes felt for the Slavs would not justify the use of this word to describe them. Therefore, we can not apply the term "Helladikoi" as denoting only the Slavs because this would lead us to consider the revolt of the Helladikoi in 727, as a pure Slavic revolt with Greek leaders, something which is highly unlikely.

Although Akamer emerges as a powerful Slav chieftain with many personal ambitions, he remained loyal to the Byzantine emperor and he should be rather seen as the chieftain of the Slavs in Verzetia and not as a leader of a federated group of Slavs occupying all Greece. He felt threatened after the dramatic political change of 780 and the full-scale attack which Irene ordered against his Slavs in Thessaly in 783.<sup>55</sup> But who were these 'Helladikoi'? Behind the word may be hidden all the high officials in the theme of Hellas who were put aside because of their iconoclastic attitudes. In this case Akamer was operating on their behalf hoping to improve his position and the position of his tribe. The fact that Akamer was involved in a plot and not in an open revolt against Irene corroborates this suggestion. The intrigue was quickly brought to light and Irene, reacting immediately, sent the patrician Constantine Sarantapechos and his son -the nephew of the empress, spatharius Theophylactos- against Akamer. The ringleaders of the conspiracy were arrested and blinded.<sup>56</sup> The success of this military intervention proves the effectiveness of the imperial authority in Greece and the alliance that the 'Helladikoi' formed with Akamer

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<sup>52</sup> Christofilopoulou, *Byzantine history*, 154-155, maintains that the Velzitae lived near the borders of Bulgaria, on the southern or southwestern flanks of the Balkan range.

<sup>53</sup> Niavis, *Nicephorus I*, 83

<sup>54</sup> Charanis, 'Helladikoi', 619

<sup>55</sup> In 780 Irene comes into power and follows an iconophile policy as opposed to her predecessors.

<sup>56</sup> Theophanes, 473

reveals the advanced level which the Greek-Slav relationships had reached by the end of the 8th century. After that we do not have other evidence about the Slavic presence in Thessaly.

The process of Hellenization, which was pursued more actively after the establishment of the theme of Hellas had effected the absorption of the Velegezitai within the Byzantine administrative system. Amongst the general factors that have been suggested by scholars, as contributing to that Hellenization, the one which applies to the Velegezitae was the accumulation of landed property and their subsequent economic equation with the indigenous Greek population.<sup>57</sup> The Velegezitae were already cultivating their lands by the second half of the 7th century and they should have been gradually exchanging their agricultural products with the industrial Greek products available in the big market-towns such as Larisa and Pharsala. This contact and later on their real co-existence and co-operation with the Greek element in some mixed villages brought them closer to the towns. It was now easy to understand the use of coins and become normal tax-payers, to learn the Greek language and realize the advantages of the more civilized Greek cultural and political practises.<sup>58</sup>

In 787 the metropolitan of Larisa reappears in the Synodical lists of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Thessalian church, renewed and reorganized after the shock of the 'Dark Ages', could impart to their adaptable society new principles and values that were soon appreciated by them. But it was probably the legendary figure of St. Achilleios -whose cult was reactivated in the middle of the 9th century- that constituted the means of domesticating and converting them to Christianity by a much more physical and peaceful process.<sup>59</sup> It is also believed that at roughly the same period a large number of loyal South-Italians were resettled in Thessaly by order of one of Nichephorus I' successors. This resettlement was dictated by the need to

<sup>57</sup> Herrin, *'Aspects'*, 113-126 and Malingoudis, *'Slavoi'*, 111-137, esp. 123-125

<sup>58</sup> As early as 675, Perboundos a chieftain of the Drogubitae Slavs was speaking Greek so fluently that he could easily pass for Greek.

<sup>59</sup> Something similar happened in Patras. After their defeat outside the walls of the town in 805 the Slavs sought refuge in the church of St. Andrew; Kordoses, *'Slavike Epoikese'*, 407, 423.



increase the number of Greek speakers and fill the demographic gaps that had been caused as a result of the killings and violent deportations of local population during the 6th and 7th centuries. The Slavs may have also been absorbed by the Vlachs. In 1066 one of the Vlach leaders of the Thessalian revolt was called *Σθλαβωτᾶς* (*Σθλάβοι, Σλάβοι*) *Καρμαλάκης*". In 1082 Anna Comnena records that Alexios I visited the village of Ezeban (=lake in the Slav dialect) that was inhabited by Vlachs.<sup>60</sup>

The acclimatization of the Slavs to the Byzantine-Christian practices and customs, and the contacts that the members of their elite were making with their Greek counterparts (the alliance between Acamer-Helladikoi is a very tangible example) marked the last step of their final absorption and virtually of their interdependence with the local element. The result of this interdependence was the emergence of a new local social structure that was fairly stable but at the same time subject to disruption every time an external authority (*strategos* of a theme, tax-collectors, military officials) attempted to extend its control over elements that had always been independent. In any case, the fact that the official policy of recolonization and of the activities of the Church was crowned with success, suggests that the Slavs found themselves outnumbered by the Greeks. It is doubtful that large numbers of South-Italians could have been transplanted into Thessaly in the 9th century; so there surely had been many Greeks remaining in Thessaly and continuing to speak Greek throughout the period of heavy Slavic pressure.

In the region of Larisa this strong and independent Slavic presence is attested in Ossa by a series of place-names and settlements that were nevertheless by far fewer than the Greek ones. These are: Karitsa, Selitsane, Kapista, Nivoliane, Retsiane, Tsouksani, Desiani (?), and Charmaina as well as the place-names of Kissavos, Zagora, Roggia, Nezeros, Ostrovo.<sup>61</sup> So, the Slavs appear to have occupied the interior of the massif of Ossa while the surrounding villages of Agia, Vesaina,

<sup>60</sup> Kekaumenos, 71; Comnena, ii, 24

<sup>61</sup> Vasmer, *Die Slaven*, 99; Gouloulis, 'Oros', 475-476

Gerakari and Marmariane remained in Byzantine hands. The heavier accumulation of Slav place-names however can be noticed around Elassona (13 out of 34, amongst them Delinista, Drianovon, Magoula, Mylogousta, Tsaritsane) a region with rich vegetation, and not very high altitude. After that it becomes clear that the Slavs of Larisa avoided making their settlements on the fertile plateaus of this extended territory but at the same time they were trying not to be too distant from them.

The German linguist Vasmer has listed some 164 place-names from Thessaly alone. Certain of his specific examples might be challenged, but the fact remains that the most clearly Slavic names do exist in the west mountainous areas of Trikala and Karditsa where the Slavs felt more secure and could preserve some of their traditions. In the east, i.e. in the regions of Larisa and Demetrias, centres of the local Byzantine authority, they were less capable of proceeding to major settlements.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Vasmer, *Die Slaven*, 85-102, lists 121 place-names in the regions of Trikala-Karditsa and only 43 in the east part of Thessaly

## II. The region of Larisa in the 9th -10th centuries

### A. Urban Revival and the Rise of 'Dynatoi'

The completion of the Slav settlements in Thessaly in the 7th century brought about significant changes in the every day life of the big urban centres. Although the Slavs had been entirely pacified by the end of the 8th century their strong presence, especially in the west part of Thessaly where they were accumulated in great numbers, was still causing problems. Moreover, the suspension of proper economic and administrative activities in that area for the whole period of the Dark Ages brought some cities to desolation. It is perhaps not accidental that the four out of the five Thessalian cities that were no longer mentioned in the sources after the passing of the critical period, were situated in this particular region of Thessaly: Gomphoi and Metropolis in the west, Caesarea and Diocletianopolis in the north-west. The only exception to this general pattern is Phthiotidai Thebae whose destruction, approximately at the end of the 7th century, remains until nowadays problematic.<sup>1</sup>

Larisa is no longer called a 'πόλις'<sup>2</sup> as was the case in the 6th-century Procopius' Buildings, but a 'φρούριον'<sup>3</sup> (fortress), a 'κάστρον'<sup>4</sup> (castle) or a 'πόλισμα'<sup>5</sup> (small fortified city, borough). These terms make clear that the town had acquired a more defensive character, as it was above all, a distinguished fortress and a place of refuge and security dominating the Thessalian countryside. Unfortunately enough, the sources do not make any mention of Thessalian cities from the middle of the 7th until the end of the 9th century. Therefore, the only features that can be deduced for the area during that period are the gradual demilitarisation of local society and the identification of the agricultural production.

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<sup>1</sup> Spieser, 'Ville en Grèce', *Villes*, 322-323, 325-326

<sup>2</sup> Procopius, *Buildings*, iv. iii, 7

<sup>3</sup> Skylitzes, 330

<sup>4</sup> Comnena, ii, 27

<sup>5</sup> Zonaras, v. iv, 238

Nevertheless, the Episcopal lists released by the Patriarchate of Constantinople (commonly known as *Notitia* no. 7) and dated by Darrouzes between 901-907<sup>6</sup> mark the onset of a new era for Thessaly at the beginning of the 10th century. These lists documentate the ecclesiastical hierarchy within the empire and the metropolis of Larisa is found amongst its entries occupying the 34th place. New bishoprics corresponding presumably to new towns are listed under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Larisa: Thaumakos (mod. Domocus) south of Larisa and Ezeros roughly in the same area.<sup>7</sup> The foundation of these new towns that date back to the 9th century undoubtedly reflects an urban revival (with direction from south to north) brought about by the restoration and the subsequent dominance of the state apparatus throughout the empire, Thessaly included. Moreover, the *Life of St. Nikolaos of Vounaina*, written in the middle of the 10th century and recording events that happened in 904, mentions the mountain of Vounaina thus implying the existence of the homonymous town whose bishopric firstly appears occupying the 26th place under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Larisa in the *Notitia* no.10 dated approximately in the 11th century.<sup>8</sup>

The creation of a network of new Thessalian cities was followed by significant changes in local society and in the way the cities were administered. From the beginning of the 9th century we are gradually entering a period which is characterised in socio-economical terms by the rise of powerful landowners or *dynatoi* as named in the Byzantine sources of the 10th-11th centuries.<sup>9</sup> Their strength is to be attributed to the extensive lands they managed to acquire after the turbulent period of the Slav invasions and settlements as a consequence of the tolerance of the imperial government combined with its inability to react. Both the remoteness of the Thessalian cities from the capital and the commitment of the emperors of the 8th-9th centuries to the fight against the Abbasid Arabs on the eastern front urged these cities to be mainly dependent on their

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<sup>6</sup> Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 78

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 284

<sup>8</sup> Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 143; Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 339, entry no.792. We should notice however that the entry of Vounaina is included in Parisinus 1362 a 15th century manuscript (*ibid*, 110-111) where the problems concerning the ecclesiastical organization of Thessaly are cited.

<sup>9</sup> Lemerle, *Agrarian history*, 90-108

own resources in order to surmount the difficulties and to regain their previous prosperity. The *dynatoi* grasped this message of self-sufficiency and took the fate of their cities into their own hands. Consequently, the important role of the municipal council and the bishop -main factors of civil administration in the 6th and 7th centuries- was lost once and for all and as a result the democratic values they represented began to decline.

The existence of these great landowners, is initially revealed in the sources under the title of *archontes*. Constantine Porphyrogenitos in the De Administrando Imperio mentions that during Romanos I Lekapenos' reign, the recalcitrant Milingoi and Ezeritae (Slav tribes) in Peloponnesos "neither obeyed the military governor (*strategos*) nor regarded the imperial mandate, but were practically independent and self-governing and neither accepted a head man (*ἀρχοντα*) at the hand of the military governor, nor heeded orders for military service under him, nor consented to perform other public services." <sup>10</sup> This account offers us a clear idea of how the provincial administration was articulated in the beginning of the 10th century: the military governor based in the capital of his theme conveyed a part of his authority to the *archontes* who played an important role in local government, whether it was on the military or administrative side. Although they held only the lesser offices their wealth (derived from the agricultural surplus) in conjunction with the privileges they were entrusted by the *strategoi* allowed them to exert real political power. By distributing to members of the community various tasks in the form of labour duties, they pursued both the prosperity of the town and their own enrichment. Although their status was never officially institutionalised, they were undoubtedly accepted by their fellow-citizens. <sup>11</sup>

An incident that occurred in Demetrias in 1040 -although half a century later than the chronological frame of our chapter- is indicative of the power and the attitude of these magnates: a certain Noe, *dynastes* in Demetrias at that time, is mentioned as having tried to appropriate the savings and the lands of his fellow citizens. What is more, when a small Arab squadron asked his permission to disembark in the town, allegedly to set up a local market, he tried to take advantage of the commercial transactions; he forced them to

<sup>10</sup> Const. Porphyg, *DAI*, 232

<sup>11</sup> Angold, *Archonts*, 236-244

sell their merchandise next to the castle -against security regulations- so as to be able to supervise the commercial fair. His greed turned out to be fatal for Demetrias, as the Arabs exploiting the laxity of the garrison, managed to capture the town.<sup>12</sup> Further down we will see how an aristocratic revolt in Ezeros paralysed the local defence on the eve of a great Bulgarian attack.

We are allowed to assume here that these great landowners were even more powerful in Larisa since it was surrounded by extensive fertile lands. Larisa was the biggest Thessalian market and the provincial administration was desperate, especially in this early stage of recovery from the 'Dark Ages', to concentrate large-scale commercial transactions in the big towns, so as not only to supervise easily the exchange of money and goods but also to ensure the regular provisioning of the city dwellers and the covering of the political and ecclesiastical apparatus based in Larisa. Thus, a relation of mutual interests was developed between the centre (Larisa) and its immediate hinterland; the farmers of the surrounding villages or fortresses were bringing their agricultural products to the town and as a return they were provided with industrial products that were practically uneconomical to produce in the countryside.

Harvey has come to consider the rise of the great landowners in combination with the increase of the land under cultivation and the subsequent intensification of the agricultural production as a blessing for the provincial economy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the presence in Larisa of these new economic factors, together with the state and church officials should have stimulated greater agricultural production and offered the town the wealth and prosperity which is reflected in 11th-12th century sources.

### **B. The Arab threat**

However the economic recovery that started taking place in Thessaly from the beginning of the 9th century was not to last long. It was restrained by the Arab presence in the aegean sea. The revolt of Thomas against Michael II (820-829) that broke out in

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<sup>12</sup>Kekaumenos, 34

<sup>13</sup> Harvey, *'Central Greece,'* 27-28



821-2 and mainly involved the naval themes, resulted in the serious enfeeblement of the Byzantine navy. A crowd of 15.000 West Muslims, who in the meanwhile had been expelled from Spain and Egypt, took up the chance and without facing significant resistance established themselves firmly in Crete from 826 to 961.<sup>14</sup> No sooner had the Arabs captured the island than they started harassing sea communications in the Aegean sea causing irreparable damage to Byzantine commerce. The Byzantine sources and the hagiographical texts give appalling details concerning their depredations in the Aegean islands (Aegina, Naxos, Paros, Patmos, Samos) and the mainland.

Although the Arab naval supremacy in the Aegean sea does not seem to have directly damaged the Thessalian mainland where Larisa was situated, we should notice that its population was seriously affected in two ways. Firstly, as a result of the inability of the town to export its agricultural products through the neighbouring ports of Demetrias, and Almyros and secondly due to its obligation to bear through taxation the burden of financing the extravagant project of reconstructing the imperial navy and launching a great number of attacks against the Cretan Arabs for the relief of the island.<sup>15</sup>

The situation, however was to change dramatically in Thessaly during the first years of the 10th century. The Arabs became an open threat and as the emperor Leo VI (886-912) proved to be totally incapable of confronting them, they extended their ambitious plans and attempted organised attacks to coastal towns that were previously considered to be safe.<sup>16</sup> In 901 an Arab fleet under the command of Damianus ravaged the Aegean islands, Monemvasia and Attica and very soon managed to penetrate deep in the Pagasitic Gulf and sack the biggest Thessalian port of Demetrias. The town was so prosperous and wealthy and the blow which the empire suffered was so serious that none of the contemporary Byzantine authors fails to mention the incident.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Theoph. Cont., 13; Const. Porphy., *DAI*, 94-97

<sup>15</sup> Three unsuccessful attempts to reconquer were made before the death of the emperor Michael II in 829. Further unsuccessful attempts were made in 843, in 866 and finally during the 10th century in 911-12 and 949; Const. Porphy., *De Cerimoniis*, 657

<sup>16</sup> Christides, *'Raids'*, 76-111

<sup>17</sup> Kameniates, 15; Leo Grammaticus, 274; Sym. Magistros, 703; Theoph. Cont, 364. The precise year of the attack is not clearly indicated by the sources, but it is recorded to have happened between the appointment of Nikolaos Mystikos as patriarch (March 1, 901) and the death of the empress Eudokia, third wife of the emperor Leo VI (April 12, 901). Jenkins, 'Chronological accuracy', 107 dated the attack in

The population of Demetrias -in accordance with the traditional Arab practices described by the Byzantine sources- was either massacred on the spot or was taken captive on the Arab vessels to be sold in the great slave markets of Syria and Crete. The town lost its glory admired by Kameniates, and its fortifications were most probably levelled.<sup>18</sup> It was not until the end of the 11th century that Demetrias managed to recover, mainly through its involvement in the maritime trade, conducted between Byzantium and the Italian naval states of Venice, Genoa and Pisa. The Arabs were now at the peak of their power. The Byzantine authority in Greece had been paralysed and in 904 they captured Thessalonica.

### C. The Slav invasion of 904

The existence of the empire was at stake as it was now engaged in fighting on two military fronts. In the west, the peaceful relations between Byzantium and Bulgaria during Boris' reign were followed by a period of restlessness as king Symeon (893-927), an admirer of the Byzantine civilisation, claimed the throne. At the beginning of his reign Symeon proclaimed a war (894) on account of or under the pretext of the endangerment of vital Bulgarian commercial interests. This war, culminating in the military disaster of the Byzantines in Boulgarophygon in 896, strengthened Symeon's position and although successful peace negotiations were then conducted, Symeon never gave up his ambitious plans.<sup>19</sup>

Bearing in mind the above conditions prevailing in the empire we can now turn to the events occurring in Thessaly as described in the Life of the military saint, Nikolaos of Vounaina.<sup>20</sup> The Life was written in the middle of the 10th century by a monk called Nikolaos and was transcribed a century later in a vernacular language by Achaikos, so as

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March or Early April of 901. This date is generally accepted against that of 897 proposed by Grégoire, *'Saint Blaise'*, 395, 402-403

<sup>18</sup> The walls of Demetrias remained desolated until their repair in 1040, during the rebellion of the Bulgarian Peter Delian; *Kekaumenos*, 28 "δς (Diavolitis a Bulgarian general) ἀπελθὼν ἀνοικοδόμησε τὰ τείχη ἡμελημένα ὄντα"

<sup>19</sup> Runciman, *Bulgarian Empire*, 137-177; Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 57-68.

<sup>20</sup> See above note no. 8



to serve liturgical purposes.<sup>21</sup> Sofianos argues that the author was of Thessalian origin or at least an inhabitant of Thessaly, on the grounds that he seems to know at first hand the events he describes and that he is contemporary of the saint.<sup>22</sup> However, a closer examination of the Life indicates that there are several problems in this narrative concerning the chronological frame within which the events take place and the identity of the invaders who caused the death of St. Nikolaos. Before we proceed to a general evaluation of the evidence given by the Life it would be useful to make an outline of its historical context:

The emperor Leo VI (886-912) impressed by the military prowess and holiness of Nikolaos charged him with the task of defending the town of Larisa against its enemies. Suddenly, and while the emperor was on a campaign in the East together with his brother Alexander, a barbarian nation called *'Αβάρεις* attacked the Roman land, looting, killing and driving the Roman population to despair. Nikolaos judging that it would be futile and dangerous for the Lariseans to offer resistance from inside the town, advanced with his soldiers to the nearby mountain of Tyrnavos. After divine inspiration, he encouraged his comrades to force their way out of their shelter and fight against their enemies. The Byzantines found themselves outnumbered and were all killed except for Nikolaos, who found refuge in the mountain of Vounaina. However, he was soon to be discovered and killed, for his persistence in his Christian faith. In the meanwhile Leo concluded his victorious campaign, a success which made the *'Αβάρεις* to pull out. Thessaly returned to its normal way of life, and Philippos, the archbishop of Larisa re-established himself in his see.<sup>23</sup>

Sofianos, the editor of the Life, identified the *'Αβάρεις* of the text with the same Arabs who sacked Demetrias in 901. His argument is mainly based on the mention that the invaders were heathens (they forced Nikolaos and his colleagues to deny their Christian faith and to adopt theirs) and on the naval supremacy of the Arabs during the particular period. Still according to Sofianos, the identification of the intruders with the Arabs is

<sup>21</sup> For the various transcripts and editions of the life; Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 25-73.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 35

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 139-147

further confirmed by their march which had a south-north direction given that Nikolaos sought for shelter first northwards in the mountain of Tyrnavos and after his defeat in the mountain of Vounaina.<sup>24</sup> This argument however does not seem to be close to reality; if indeed the invaders were Arabs coming from Demetrias Nikolaos -after his defeat to Melouna- would not take the risk of descending to Vounaina, but instead he would prefer to head northwards and seek shelter in the mountains of Olympos or Titaros and from there to Thessalonica. Moreover, Sofianos indirectly argues -he does not make it clear- that the author of the Life wrote by mistake *'Αβάρεις* instead of the right *'Αράβεις* - *"Αραβες* putting the blame on the anagrammatization of the letters  $\beta$  and  $\rho$ . But even in this case his argument is not valid. A comparative study not only of the main contemporary Byzantine sources but also of the Greek Saints Lives shows that the modern Greek word *"Αραβες* was utterly inappropriate to denote the Cretan Arabs who preyed upon the Greek coasts during the 9th-10th centuries.<sup>25</sup>

Avramea came up to reject the main arguments of Sofianos, dating the attack in 896 and identifying the invaders with Symeon's Bulgars.<sup>26</sup> She suggested that a part of the Bulgarian army that took part in the victorious battle of Bulgarophygon (896) was diverted southwards to the region of Larisa and Vounaina. This army, according to her, marched across the Aliakmon valley and after having passed through the pass of

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 113-121; Sofianos also argues that a proof of their identity is i) the phrase characterising them "heirs of curse and sons of darkness" (*τῆς κατάρας κληρονόμοι καὶ τοῦ σκότους υἱοί*) a biblical phrase that makes an allusion to people mentioned in the Bible, and particularly the Arabs, who being heirs of Agar and Ismael are considered to be under curse, and ii) the phrase "the saint was admired by both the earth and the sea (*τόν ἄγιον θαυμάζέτωσαν ἡ γῆ τε καὶ ἡ θάλασσα*, 173) contained in some glorifying verses of the saint's service. However these arguments do not stand up to serious debate given the rhetorical style of the Life and the fact that the Saint's service was written neither by the author of the Life nor during the 10th century.

<sup>25</sup> Sofianos, *Osios Loukas*, 126 "*τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ἀγάρ*"; "*οἱ τοῦ Ἰσμαῆλ*"; Carras, *Life of St. Athanasia of Aegina*, 212 "*τῶν γὰρ Μαυρουσίων βαρβάρων*"; Kurtz, *Life of Theodora*, 2 "*ταῖς τῶν Ἰσμηλιτῶν*"; *Vita S. Pauli Junioris*, 67 "*ὑπὸ δὲ τῶν υἱῶν τῆς Ἀγάρ*"; Papaoikonomos, *St. Petros*, ch. 23 "*καὶ Κρήτες*"; *Vita S. Elia il Giovane*, 505 "*οἱ Ἰσμηλιῆται*"; Theoph. Contin, 364 "*ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀγαρηῶν*"; Da Costa-Louillet, *Saints de Grece*, 309-369; Christides, *Raids*, 83, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 89-96 puts emphasis on the following incidents: i) that the invasion occurred in the interior of Thessaly whereas the Arabs limited their operations to the coastland. However Theoph. Cont, 137 records an Arab penetration as far as Mount Latros, in Asia Minor during Theophilos' reign, ii) the magnitude of the devastation and the flight of the military commander and of the archbishop can not be justified by the operation of a single army unit which had been detached from the Arab fleet and iii) that the Bulgars could have caused such a destruction, inasmuch as it had not passed a long time after their Christianization (864) and because they are recorded to have caused similar damages in their descent in 917.

Sarantaporo proceeded to Elasson, Domenicon, Damasi and finally Tyrnavos where it fought against Nikolaos' forces.

However neither the identity of the intruders nor the date of the invasion that Avramea suggests, seem to be supported by the evidence. The Byzantines after their defeat in Bulgarophygon, hastened to come into peace negotiations with Symeon, and reached a final agreement with him. Leo Choerosphactes, the Byzantine diplomat who took over the conduct of these negotiations made, during 896, repeated requests to the Bulgarian ruler for the return of 120.000 Byzantine prisoners who were taken captive in the period 894-896. Therefore it would have been unlikely for Leo not to make the slightest allusion, to such a destructive Bulgarian invasion ordered by Symeon, during the negotiations. What is more, Symeon -though in the beginning arrogant and uncompromising- eventually agreed to hand over the prisoners as well as thirty castles captured in the theme of Dyrrachium in exchange for annual lavish subsidies from the Byzantine government which maintained until 912.<sup>27</sup>

As far as the identity of the invaders is concerned we can argue that they did not constitute an organised unit of the Bulgarian army, since the impression given by the Life of St. Nikolaos is that they were merely barbarians, irregular troops, who were marauding throughout Greece unchecked. Nowhere in the Life is it stated that they had any recognised military commander: the decision to condemn Nikolaos to death is collective (*οἱ μῆτορες Ἀβάρεις... τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ καταψηφίζοντες*) and the author is always referring to them in an impersonal way although he seems to be conversant with names and places. The description of their activities is reminiscent of the Slav tribes penetrating to Greece in 6th-7th centuries. The only difference is that in our occasion the invaders were Slavs settled already in central and south Macedonia.<sup>28</sup> In much of this territory the absence of both Byzantine and Bulgar officials permitted the Slavs to ignore whatever

<sup>27</sup> Kolias, *Choerosphactes*, 113, "εἴκοσι καὶ ἑκατὸν χιλιάδας αἰχμαλώτων ἐκεῖθεν λαβὼν καὶ σπονδὰς ἐγγράφους εἰρηνικὰς ποιήσας ἐπανεῆλθον. τοῦτο δὲ τὰ τοῦ Δυρραχίου τριάκοντα φρούρια σὺν αὐτῷ πλούτῳ καὶ αὐτοῖς οἰκήτορι τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου δῶρον προσήνεγκα."

<sup>28</sup> Kameniatas, 8 "ἐμπεριέχει δὲ... τὸ πεδῖον τοῦτο καὶ ἀμφιμίκτους τινὰς κώμας, ὧν αἱ μὲν πρὸς τῇ πόλει τελοῦσι (Thessalonica) Δρουγουβίται τινὲς καὶ Σαγουδάτοι τὴν κλῆσιν ὀνομαζόμενοι, αἱ δὲ τῷ συνομοροῦντι τῶν Σκυθῶν ἔθνει οὐ μακρὰν ὄντι τοὺς φόρους ἀποδίδουσιν."

agreements (including the peace treaties of 897 and later of 924) the two great states were coming to. Presumably some Slavs settled in Byzantine territory were loyal to and possibly even paying tribute to the Bulgars.<sup>29</sup> Symeon apparently used them several times, so as on the one hand to extort and press the Byzantine government and on the other to strengthen his own position. The Life says that once the emperor Leo won the victory in the East and was ready to turn to the West the invaders, being intimidated returned quickly to their own territory, a fact which reveals that they were operating very close to their dwellings.<sup>30</sup>

These Slavs, settled very close to Thessalonica, must have entered Thessaly through the narrow pass of Damasi or the most possible, the defile of Melouna. Nikolaos apparently considered to confront the invaders there with a view to preventing them from penetrating to the plain. However, the battle that was given at Melouna resulted at a crushing defeat of the Byzantines. Given that the defile of Melouna was controlled by the invaders by no means could Nikolaos flee to Olympos, and the only road of retreat left, was the one that passing south of Tyrnavos ended up in the mountain of Vounaina.

Regarding the exact date of their invasion is concerned we can place it in 904. The only point in the Life of St. Nikolaos that can help us to reach such a conclusion is the mention of the Byzantine campaign in the East at the head of which allegedly was the emperor Leo and his brother Alexander. Of course no Byzantine source mentions that the emperor personally took arms against the empire's external enemies and this is a fact that we should take for granted particularly given Leo's personality. Sofianos has dismissed the whole campaign as Nikolaos' (the author) invention in his attempt to remove the blame for the sack and devastation of Larisa from Nikolaos (the military commander) who was supposedly left alone to defend the city deprived of the assistance of the imperial troops that were campaigning elsewhere.. He also states that this campaign never took place as it was not mentioned by the contemporary Byzantine sources.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Fine, *Early Mediaeval Balkans*, 140

<sup>30</sup> Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 144, "οἱ γὰρ Ἀβάρεις τῇ τοῦ βασιλέως υποστροφῇ φυγῇ δὲ ἀψάμενοι τὴν ἑαυτῶν χώρα ταχὺ κατελάβανον.."

<sup>31</sup> Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 127-128.

However the Arab historian Tabari in his account of the Byzantine-Abassid relations in 904 records a successful Byzantine campaign against the Arabs: "in Sha'ban (June 18-July 16, 904) word arrived in Baghdad that the Byzantine ruler had sent ten crosses with one hundred thousand men against the border towns and that a number of them had moved on Al-Hadath. They had raided and burned, and they had captured every Muslim they had been able to".<sup>32</sup> This is chronologically the first Byzantine penetration in Arab soil recorded during Leo's reign and apparently is to be identified with the campaign that is mentioned in the Life. As far as Tabari's credibility is concerned we do not have any real reason to reject his account if it records an incident unfavourable for the Arabs.

Two Bulgarian attacks against Byzantine territory are also recorded by Skylitzes and Choerosphactes to have taken place in the same year. Skylitzes records: "the Bulgarians were repeating their attacks against the Romans; the Arabs on receiving the news, after having equipped a fleet, sent it against the coasts of the Roman power".<sup>33</sup> The Arab fleet which is mentioned by Skylitzes was the fleet of Leo of Tripoli that was to sack and devastate Thessalonica at the end of July of 904. Taking that into consideration we can date the "repeated Bulgarian attacks", mentioned by Skylitzes between the spring (when the best part of the Byzantine army was on campaign in the East) and July (when Thessalonica was sacked) of 904 and connect them with the attack of the *Ἀβάρεις* in Larisa mentioned in our Life. The second Bulgarian attack took place shortly after the sack of Thessalonica and is recorded by Choerosphactes in a letter that he addresses to the emperor Leo: the Bulgarians in Macedonia under the pretext that they did not receive their annual subsidy which had fallen in the hands of the Arabs descended southwards and began to settle in Thessalonica.<sup>34</sup>

In both occasions the attacks are mentioned to have been launched by Bulgars. However the accounts of Skylitzes and Choerosphactes can not rule out the possibility

<sup>32</sup> Al-Tabari, vol. 38, 147. The campaign is also mentioned by Ibn al-Atir, Arib, Abn' l- Mahasin and Ibn Haldun. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabs*, v. II, 18, 56, 143, 259, 270

<sup>33</sup> Skylitzes, 182.

<sup>34</sup> Kolias, *Choerosphactes*, 113, "καὶ τρίτη πρεσβεία τὴν ἀλωθεῖσαν ὑπ' Ἀγαρηῶν Θεσσαλονίκην κατοικῆσαι βουλευθέντων Βουλγάρων πείσας καὶ διώξας ἀπέλαβον" Runciman, *Bulgarian Empire*, 152



that the invading army was comprised of Bulgars and Slavs alike, since Symeon seems to have consistently used the latter in the pursuit of his expansionist policy.

The whole event is a bit confusing. To conclude: The *Ἀβάρεις* mentioned in the Life of St. Nikolaos were Slavs established very close to Thessalonica and occasionally enrolled in some kind of military formation serving the Bulgarian army. Being thus loosely controlled by Symeon and trying to find new lands to settle, as they had realised their precarious position in the borderland between Byzantium and Bulgaria, they might have descended southwards to Larisa just before or after the sack of Thessalonica. In their penetration they were helped by the collapse of the imperial administration in Macedonia and in the whole of Greece and by the absence of an efficient Byzantine army to confront them. At the same time they may have deliberately contributed to Symeon's plan to drive Greece to exhaustion so as to conquer it with greater ease. They must be the same Slavs who took part in the Bulgarian campaign against Greece in 917, overran the country five years later and according to the Life of St. Peter of Argos occupied Peloponnesos for three years (922-925). Besides, even the name used by Nikolaos to denote them (*Ἀβάρεις*) although it does not apply in the contemporary Byzantine sources may be justified, bearing in mind Constantine Porphyrogenitus' statement that the Slavonic nations used to be called *Ἀβάρου*.<sup>35</sup>

In any case Larisa and the adjacent regions that had been struck by the invaders seem to have made a fast recovery from this unexpected blow. The economic prosperity, obtained in the previous century was enough to counteract any major setbacks. Moreover the fugitive bishop of Larisa Philip was reinstated in his see and took over the task of raising his flock's morale. He ordered the translation of the martyr's co-sufferers' holy relics from the mountain of Tyrnavos to Larisa, where they constituted an object of devout worship by the Lariseans.<sup>36</sup> In 913, after a church that belonged to his diocese passed under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Thebes, he did not hesitate to express his bitterness and accuse openly the Patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos of intervening at the

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<sup>35</sup> Const. Porphy., *DAI*, 122,

<sup>36</sup> Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 144

expense of his ecclesiastical interests. The Patriarch appeased him in an apologetic way and promised the restoration of the church in question under his jurisdiction.<sup>37</sup>

#### **D. The Bulgarian Invasions Under Symeon**

No matter how fast Larisa recovered in economic and ecclesiastical terms, the military and administrative gap that had been widened dangerously during Leo's reign was posing a constant threat to the safety of the area. The situation took a turn for the worse when Alexander, Leo's brother ascended to the throne. His refusal to pay the annual subsidy fixed by the peace treaty of 896 gave Symeon a strong motive to renew his military operations against the empire. In the summer of 912 he appeared before the walls of Constantinople and he left only when he received the arrears of the tribute and promises for marriage between one of his daughters and the young emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. However the assumption of power by Zoe (Leo's wife) and the annulment of the agreements dashed Symeon's hopes for getting hold of the Byzantine throne and made him resort to arms one more. For a two-year period he abstained from any territorial encroachments (914-916) as he was making feverish war preparations but in 917 he launched a major raid on Greece with his troops reaching the Gulf of Corinth.

This raid which is not recorded by the main Byzantine sources, struck a new and greater blow to Larisa and its region. The invader was now the organised Bulgarian army that was operating on a much larger scale than the Slavs who attacked Larisa in 904, and in accordance with Symeon's plan to conquer Greece and annex it to his kingdom; after his unsuccessful attempts to capture Constantinople, Symeon realised that if he wanted to become 'emperor of Romans and Bulgars' he had to direct his operations in the Balkans at Greece first, so as to strain the resources of the empire by depriving it of the richest wheat-producing areas, and their tax-payers.<sup>38</sup> Therefore viewing Symeon's campaign

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<sup>37</sup> Nicholas, *Letters*, 403

<sup>38</sup> Skylitzes, 400. It is interesting that when Constantinople was struck by a famine in 1037, John Orphanotrophos had to buy wheat from Greece and Peloponnesus.



against Greece as a "distraction of his principal objective" is to miss the point of his overall policy.<sup>39</sup> After his victory at Anchialus the Bulgarian king laid stress on his Greek campaign and if we believe Kekaumenos' account he might have personally taken part in it, at least in its first stage.<sup>40</sup>

However, our most valuable source for the Bulgarian descent of 917 is the Life of St. Luke The Younger compiled by an anonymous author some time after 961. The Life suggests that the Byzantines strove to form a safety zone just below the Thermopylai pass, thus rendering Thessaly an easy target to the enemy. When the saint attempted to enter Thessaly, he was arrested and whipped by the soldiers who were guarding the passes.<sup>41</sup> The Bulgarian army must have captured Larisa without facing any strong opposition. As in 904, the Larisean bishop Jakob was forced to flee and take refuge in Bithynia, where his scholar brother Alexander held the bishopric of Nicaea.<sup>42</sup> The invaders forcing their way southwards were interested not only in ravaging, killing and taking of prisoners but also in claiming heavy taxes from the Greek population, who being intimidated by these atrocities sought refuge in secure positions and castles in Peloponnesos and Euboia.<sup>43</sup> In this context it would not be inappropriate to suggest a similar migration of the population of Larisa' towards the islands of Skiathos and Skopelos that were closest to the Thessalian coastline. The Greek mainland from Thessalonica as far as the Gulf of Corinth had passed under the control of the Bulgars and the Byzantine official who was entrusted with the task of guarding the Peloponnesian shores was very strict not to let any vessel come close to Greece.<sup>44</sup> Oikonomides commenting on the situation that prevailed in Greece has rightly argued that the Bulgarian army invaded every year and collected taxes without systematically trying to

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<sup>39</sup> Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 64

<sup>40</sup> Kekaumenos, 32-33. Unfortunately there is a gap in the manuscript that does not allow us to conclude with certainty which was that city. Litavrin has suggested Kastoria but his reasoning is not convincing.

<sup>41</sup> Sofianos, *Osios Loukas*, 131

<sup>42</sup> Alexander, corrector and scholiast of manuscript G of Lucian, Vatic. Gr. 90, writes that he carried out the corrections together with his brother Jakob, metropolitan of Larisa. Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 129-130. Jakob is also mentioned in a letter of the patriarch Nikolaos addressed to Alexander; Nicholas, *Letters*, 318

<sup>43</sup> Sofianos, *Osios Loukas*, 148

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 150-151

besiege the cities.<sup>45</sup> These invasions in fact aimed at a show of power since the Bulgarians were confident that all the Greek towns would fall in their hands in due course.

Shortly after this first wave of Bulgarian invasions a second one followed in 922. The Bulgars were now escorted by Slavs (*Σκλαβησιάνοι*) who were hardly controlled by the Bulgarian government.<sup>46</sup> Larisa may have suffered their depredations once more but it is certain that by this time its immediate hinterland would lie desolate. After their pass from Thessaly and looking for new lands to settle permanently, the Slavs succeeded in passing across to the Peloponnesos where they imposed their presence for three years (923-925). According to the *Life of St. Peter of Argos* "they massacred many people and thoroughly devastated the whole country completely destroying the traces of former wealth and good order".<sup>47</sup> The description of the raiding that the Slavs perpetrated between 922-925 is similar with that given by the *Life of St. Nikolaos of Vounaina* of the *Ἀβάρεις* that invaded Thessaly twenty years earlier. The enormous destruction that the invading Slavs caused on both occasions is to be explained by the fact that they were acting independently and without receiving orders from Symeon. Besides, it is well known that in 924 (a year that the Slavs were still operating in Greece) and after his meeting with Romanos Lakapenos the Bulgarian ruler agreed to withdraw all his troops from the Byzantine territory. At any rate in 927 Symeon died, the Bulgarians under their Tsar Peter lost their previous impetus, and Larisa together with the whole of Greece could at last enjoy a period of lasting peace that was disrupted only temporarily by the Hungarian invasion of 943.

<sup>45</sup> Oikonomides, *The monastery of Hosios Loukas*, 253

<sup>46</sup> Const. Porphyg., 234 "καὶ εὐθέως γενομένης καὶ τῆς τῶν Σκλαβησιάνων ἐπιθέσεως κατὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ θέματος (Peloponnesos) .. ἐπεὶ δὲ, καθὼς προεῖρηται, εἰσῆλθον οἱ Σκλαβησιάνοι ἐν τῷ θέματι Πελοποννήσου, δεδιὼς ὁ βασιλεὺς, ἵνα μὴ καὶ αὐτοὶ προστεθέντες τοῖς Σθλάβοις παντελῇ ἐξολόθρευσιν τοῦ αὐτοῦ θέματος ἐργάσωνται.."

<sup>47</sup> Papaoikonomos, *St. Petros*, ch.19; Vasiliev, *Life of St. Peter of Argos*, 163-191; The attack is however dated to 981 by Tivcev, *Nouvelles donnees*, 37-45 and Krabartogiannos, *Ἀποψεῖς*, 213-220. Oikonomides on the other hand (*Monastery of Hosios Loukas*, 253) connects the events described by the Chronicle of Galaxeidi with the Bulgarian invasion of 917 overlooking the starting line of the account: "τὸν καιρὸ τῆς βασιλείας Κωνσταντίνου Ρωμανοῦ" which suggests according to Bees, *Ἀἰ ἐπιδρομαί*, 353-355 and Vasiliev, *Life of St. Peter of Argos*, 182 a date after 920 when Romanos Lakapenos became emperor.

### E. The capture of Larisa by Samuel

The strategic importance of Larisa and its proximity to the second Bulgarian kingdom -founded by Samuel in 973 and established in Ochrid- drew the town very quickly in the vortex of the Byzantino-Bulgarian war that broke out in the 980's. Moreover the conditions that prevailed in Thessaly at roughly the same period did not favour the formation of a proper defensive system that could repulse Samuel's armies.

A local revolt that broke out in 975 and focused most probably in the city of Ezeros (south of Larisa.) is recorded by a letter whose author and recipient are totally unknown<sup>48</sup> According to that letter after their defence had collapsed (*ἡ γὰρ φύλαξ αὐτῶν διεργράγη*) the rebels suffered heavy casualties, a lesson that may have proved to be a warning for all those who were contemplating similar plans. (*παιδαγωγεῖ τὸν καθ' ἕκαστον καὶ ἀναχαιτίζει τὸν βουλόμενον πρὸς τὸν ὅμοιον ὀλισθόν ἀποφέρεισθαι.*) Having rejected the assistance of the local population the strategos of Hellas, pursued the remaining rebels, trapped them in the fortress of Ezeros and crushed their rebellion. (*Πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον πλῆθος συνῆλθε τῷ στρατηγῷ, ὁ καλῶς ποιῶν ἀπεδίωξε.....καὶ μέλλει νῦν τῷ Ἐζερῷ ἐπελθεῖν καὶ ...κατατροπώσασθαι τοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ ἐμφιλοχωροῦντας ἢ ἐμφωλεύοντας*). At the head of the rebellion were the sons of Baldos and a certain Theodosios, persons "haut placés et bien connus" for both the person who is writing and the one who is receiving the letter. This according to Zaimova proves that we are dealing not with a peasant uprising but with a much more serious revolt that was organised and co-ordinated by great landowners.<sup>49</sup> The spreading of the revolt necessitated the intervention of the supreme military official of the theme who was presumably called to safeguard the interests of the peasant population against the encroachments that the *dynatoi* perpetrated through their private armies. Only this way

<sup>48</sup> Darrouzes, *Epistoliers*, 356-357. According to the editor however the most possible localities are either the Ezeros in Bithynia or the one in Laconia; Cheynet, *Contestations*, 26 on the ground of the mention of the Peloponnesian name Rentakios is inclined to identify it with the latter. He also wrongly suggests that the revolt can be connected with the Slav tribe of Ezeritai. Clearly this is not the case because i) the Slavs of Peloponnesos were completely pacified by this period and ii) hardly a Slav revolt especially of ethnic character could cause sorrow to the Byzantine who wrote the letter: "*καὶ τὸ μὲν θρηνεῖν αὐτῶν τὴν ἀπώλειαν συγγνωμόνος ἐστὶ διακρίσεως καὶ εἰδυίας συναγεῖν τοῖς ἀλλοιῶσι κακῶς*"

<sup>49</sup> Tapkova-Zaimova, 'Autour', 237-239

can be explained the eagerness of the local population to participate in the suppression of the revolt. The strategos reckoned that an active interference of the oppressed population could generalise the scuffle and destabilise the whole province.

Zaimova has suggested that the incident of Ezeros is similar to the feudal revolts that erupted in Asia-Minor during the 970's.<sup>50</sup> It is well known that Samuel exploited skilfully these revolts and especially the one of Bardas Skleros from 976-979. He launched numerous attacks all along his frontier in Thrace and Macedonia and at a very early stage (976) of the renewed Byzantino-Bulgarian war, he appeared to have managed to penetrate southwards as far as Thessaly.

Larisa was at a great risk as the Bulgars laid a siege that was to last ten years. The defence of the town was entrusted by the emperor to the strategos of the theme of Hellas a certain Kekaumenos of Armenian origin.<sup>51</sup> Kekaumenos managed not only to secure Larisa from the heavy pressure that the Bulgarians exercised on the town but also to achieve a reasonable level of prosperity for its population. From 976 onwards Samuel appeared every year before the walls of the city but he was always repulsed either by military operations launched from the inside of the fortress or by lavish gifts and subsidies that Kekaumenos offered with a view to appeasing his warlike character. The Lariseans were thus allowed to sow their fields and reap their harvests on a regular basis. In 980 however, -when the Bulgarian military potential increased with the successive winning of new territories throughout the Balkan peninsula- Samuel appreciated how vital it was to get hold of Larisa in order to complete his Greek campaign successfully. Kekaumenos did not hesitate to reconsider his policy: reckoning that any further resistance would be futile and harmful for the population of the town he came to agreements with Samuel and acknowledged him (*ἐφῆμισεν αὐτόν*) as his sovereign.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, 237-239

<sup>51</sup> The same Kekaumenos is recorded by his grandson and author of the *Strategikon*, (Kekaumenos, 26) to have captured the Byzantine fortress of Tibion-Dvin in Great Armenia where he was operating as an independent toparch hostile to the byzantines; Lemerle, *'Prolegomenes'*, 29-36, however doubts the possession of Dvin (Arab capital of Armenia) by Kekaumenos; he also identifies the defender of Larisa with Gregorios strategos of Larisa and Macedonia mentioned in an inscription dated to 1006-7 and found in the church of the Holy Virgin in Egrek-Tao north of Theodosiopolis; he continues by saying that this Gregorios was called Kizaci but he changed his name into Kekaumenos when he entered Byzantine service. However, Oikonomides, *Listes*, 358 maintains that the inscription refers to the strategos of the other Larisa in Asia-Minor; Savvides, *'Family of Cecaumenus'*, 12-27

Kekaumenos made his stratagem known to the emperor Basil II by a letter in which he praises himself for his ability to make provision for the uninterrupted food supply of the town during the four year period (976-980): "συνέβαλα τοὺς καρποὺς ἀρκοῦντας τοῖς Λαρισαίοις ἐπὶ χρόνοις τέσσαρσι καὶ ἰδοῦ, πάλιν εἰσὶ τῆς βασιλείας σου δοῦλοι". Basil approved of his strategos' actions, but for unknown reasons he recalled him to Constantinople three years later (983).<sup>52</sup> Zaimova has argued that contrary to his grandson's assertions, the general was not always loyal to the imperial government, and that behind his brief acknowledgement of the Bulgarian ruler, is hidden not so much his concern for the Lariseans but his centrifugal tendencies.<sup>53</sup> Philippou who falls in with Zaimova's views, goes further by assuming that if the emperor had accepted Kekaumenos initiative, he would not have replaced him, particularly during a very critical period for the existence of the town.<sup>54</sup> The hypothesis that is put forward by the two scholars is debatable and certainly does not seem to be proven by the evidence given in Kekaumenos' account.

Firstly because Kekaumenos would not feel embarrassed to admit that his grandfather was a defector; In another point of his *Strategikon* he clearly calls him a Roman's enemy (ἐχθρὸς τῆς Ρωμανίας).<sup>55</sup> If in fact Kekaumenos had acknowledged Samuel so as to fulfil his personal ambitions he would not hesitate to defect to the Bulgarian side especially when he was recalled by the emperor *supposedly* to be punished. In 983 Samuel had fully taken the initiative and seemed to control the situation; therefore a defection instead of his coming back to Constantinople would seem more reasonable. Secondly, the emperor recalled Kekaumenos only after the passage of three years (καὶ μετὰ τρεῖς ἐνιαυτοὺς προεβάλετο ἕτερον στρατηγὸν εἰς Ἑλλάδα) from the moment he received his letter, and for reasons which, as we have seen, are totally unknown to us. If indeed, as Philippou maintains, Basil II had been dissatisfied by the attitude of his general he would have recalled him immediately after he learned the news for his submission and he would not have allowed the lapse of three critical years before

<sup>52</sup> Kekaumenos, 65

<sup>53</sup> Tapkova-Zaimova, 'Autour', 239

<sup>54</sup> Philippou, 'To proto Boulgariko Kratos', 82

<sup>55</sup> See above note 62



making his decision. Thirdly, apart from the favourable account of Kekaumenos to his grandfather an anonymous contemporary text refers to him as the "brave Thessalian general with an iron soul. " 56

In 983 Kekaumenos was recalled to Constantinople and the new strategos failed to deceive Samuel in the way his predecessor did. Samuel apparently met strong opposition that stimulated him to tighten the pincer movement around Larisa. By preventing, for three successive years, the local population from reaping their harvests he reduced the town to a state of famine. The garrison and the civil militia that partook in the defence of the town, deprived as they were of the necessary supplies, could not hold on any further. Larisa was eventually captured in 986 and the whole population was either reduced to slavery or taken captive to Ochrid. 57 The only exception was the renowned family of Nikulitzas. Its members enjoyed an exceptional treatment and were given the right to migrate elsewhere.

On the basis of the family ties that connected strategos Kekaumenos with the family of Nikulitzas Lemerle has suggested that Samuel's exceptional generosity is to be justified by his wish to express his admiration to Kekaumenos for the extraordinary diplomatic and military skills that displayed in the course of their personal struggle i.e. from 976-983. It is not impossible that the person who succeeded Kekaumenos as strategos of Hellas was the same Nikulitzas who had previously obtained the military offices of dux of Hellas and comes excubitorum. Therefore, Kekaumenos' (the author of the Strategikon) unwillingness to mention his name may be explained by his embarrassment to criticise his relative for his failure to protect Larisa, and accordingly by his fear to affect the cordial relationships between the two families. 58 In this point it should be made absolutely clear that Nikulitzas, dux and then strategos of Hellas between

56 Ed. Lampros, *NE* 16 (1922), 53: "ψυχὴν σιδηρὰν .. ὁ στερρὸς εἶχε Θετταλῶν στρατηγός"

57 The Vlach population particularly, was enrolled in some kind of special military formation used by Samuel in his struggle against the Byzantines. They were settled around Prespa, and preserved the worship of their patron saint Achillios. Samuel's own wife is recorded to be a Larisean of Vlach origin; Risos, *The Vlachs of Larisa*, 206-207.

58 Lemerle, *Prolegomenes*, 42-45

980-983 is a totally different person from Nikulitzas mentioned by Skylitzes to have repeatedly changed sides during the period 1003-1018.<sup>59</sup>

Larisa paid a heavy price not only in economic and demographic but also in religious terms. The relics of the town's patron St. Achillios whose cult had reached its peak in the 10th century, constituted the most valuable loot of Samuel's success. The seizing and transportation of the saint's holy relics to Ochrid, where a huge basilica was consecrated in his name demoralised the Thessalian population and at the same time gave a strong religious boost to the war of liberation which Samuel had proclaimed only ten years earlier.<sup>60</sup>

As far as the administrative status of the town in this critical period is concerned Avramea has suggested that Larisa was upgraded to the rank of capital of the theme of Hellas, due to the special circumstances that persisted after the beginning of the Bulgarian wars in 976.<sup>61</sup> She bases her argument on two facts: i) the two military officials appointed as strategoi of the theme of Hellas during the prolonged siege of the town are mentioned by Kekaumenos to have performed their duties in Larisa, ii) an inscription that was found in Armenia (dated in 1006-7) mentions a certain "Gregory patrician and general of Larisa and Macedonia"; on the basis of this mention Avramea believes that Gregory was exercising power over the combined military forces of the town (or region) of Larisa and Macedonia.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, nowhere in the sources, contemporary or later is it stated that Larisa was ever the capital of the theme of Hellas. The presence of the two strategoi in Larisa in the period under consideration is to be explained by the strategic importance of the town as a physical rampart that could prevent Samuel from penetrating further down, and posing a threat to the vital economic interests of the empire in southern Greece. The strategoi were dispatched there in order to organise the defensive system and co-ordinate the repulsive operations. Regarding the inscription, apart from Oikonomides' argument

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<sup>59</sup> Skylitzes, 334, 363 : Lemerle, *'Prolegomenes'*, 53, note (1)

<sup>60</sup> Skylitzes, 330

<sup>61</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 32-33; Lemerle, *'Prolegomenes'*, 34

<sup>62</sup> above note no. 62



that it refers to an administrative apparatus based in Asia Minor, we can additionally suggest that it would be very unusual for a strategos to supervise two different military units located in separate geographically areas. Besides, the emergence of Larisa as a new capital for the theme is not so likely, if we bear in mind that it would involve the transference of a complex network of administrative and fiscal officials.

The news of the capture of Larisa urged Basil II to take the initiative, and organise a campaign against Sofia, aimed at distracting Samuel from Greece and preventing the Bulgarians from expanding into their old eastern provinces. However the years until 995 are characterised by the complete dominance of the Bulgarians in the Balkan battlefields. In the same year Samuel won an important victory close to Thessalonica and forced his way southwards. He passed through the valley of Tempe, crossed the Peneius river, and marching through the narrow pass of Thermopylae he reached Boetia, Attica and eventually the Isthmus of Corinth.<sup>63</sup>

The emperor was engaged in the eastern front but he showed great interest in the invasion by sending to Greece one of his ablest generals. Nikephoros Ouranos arrived in Thessalonica in the course of the year 996 and following the fringes of Olympus managed to recapture Larisa where he left his heavier accoutrements. Skylitzes does not provide any further details concerning the opposition offered by the Bulgarians in Larisa. Perhaps Ouranos led a powerful army, as is indicated by the great ease with which he passed unopposed through Pharsala and the Apidanos river, and reached Spercheios river (near mod. Lamia) where he crushed the bulk of the Bulgarian army. Samuel with his son and some of his followers hardly managed to flee through the mountains of Aetolia. From 996 onwards he was not given the chance to invade Thessaly again, because the emperor personally took arms against him. In 1003, after a successful campaign in Macedonia Basil II entered Thessaly where he spent two months rebuilding the fortresses that had been destroyed by Samuel and besieging the rest that were still in Bulgarian hands. Their garrisons after their surrender (or capture) were transferred to the

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<sup>63</sup> Skylitzes, 341. The fear which the Bulgarian descent inspired in the general of Peloponnesos Apokaukos is reflected in a hagiographical text of the 10th century, Sullivan, *Saint Nicon*, 40

Macedonian town of Volerus where they were settled permanently so as to strengthen the labour force of the area.<sup>64</sup>

The revolt which broke out in Bulgaria in 1040 as a result of the harsh fiscal policy of the emperor Michael IV the Paphlagonian (1034-1041) affected Thessaly only temporarily. The leader of the revolt Peter Delian managed to bring the whole population of the Byzantine theme of Bulgaria (i.e. the population around the towns of modern Belgrade, Naissos, Skopia) over to his side, and in the same year he captured Dyrrachium and Demetrias. The Bulgarian general Litoboes Diaboletes who was left behind to guard the Thessalian port proved incapable of consolidating his authority. The population of the town after entering into secret negotiations with the military governor of Thessalonica (dux of Thessalonica) arranged the dispatch of a strong Byzantine squadron that assisted them to arrest the invaders and surrender them to the Byzantines. The Bulgarian menace had passed irreversibly. Delian was blinded and his recalcitrant supporters in Bulgaria were subdued after the campaign which the emperor Michael launched against them a year later (1041).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Skylitzes, 344

<sup>65</sup> Kekaumenos, 28

### III. LARISA IN THE 11TH CENTURY

#### A. Social and Political Changes

The death of Basil II marked a new period of political instability which lasted until 1081. This period is characterised by the apparent inability of the reigning emperors to impose their authority over the *dynatoi* whose appetite for the acquisition of more land at the expense of small landowners proved to be detrimental to the empire. Although in the long run the empire appeared militarily weak to confront its external enemies (Pecenegs, Uzes, Normans, Turks) the emergence of new towns from the beginning of the 11th century reveals a general resurgence of urban life attested mainly in the Balkans and contrary to Anatolia whose own existence was critically challenged by the Seljuk Turks. In Thessaly, the creation of new settlements is revealed by the Episcopal lists that reflect the ecclesiastical situation within the empire some years after the subjugation of Bulgaria by Basil II.<sup>1</sup>

At the administrative level Thessaly came to constitute a part of the theme of Hellas -Peloponnesos created in the first half of the 11th century after the unification of the two provinces into one unit. The theme was administered by both military and civil appointees but in 1094 the administrative reforms of Alexios I brought it under the authority of the megas doux who took charge of all maritime parts of the empire.

Moreover the shifting of the imperial interests from the village and the countryside to the towns, as centres of local administration, allowed an elite of landed magnates to exercise their power on a much more strengthened basis. They owned a lot of land in the surrounding countryside but they preferred to reside in the town from where they could easily control the local garrisons and the tax-payers of their administrative entity. The consumption of their wealth (originating from their landed property and their grip on local offices) helped the relatively densely populated cities to acquire a new and more important role as local commercial centres.

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<sup>1</sup> Avramea, 'Villes', 289; Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 326-327, 339

A rudimentary manufacturing capacity was soon developed, as exceptionally skilled artisans started taking permanent residence in towns like Corinth, Sparta and Athens. The evidence we have at our disposal for a similar economic flourishing in Thessaly is extremely scanty. Apart from Kekaumenos' mention of a big commercial fair conducted in Demetrias in the 1040's, only the building of a few monasteries in the eastern part of the region of Larisa and around Ossa could be considered as safe signs of economic prosperity.<sup>2</sup> It would be misleading to attribute the completion of such religious constructions to casual factors instead of the initiative taken by the powerful local administrators in their attempt to give a boost to the religious sentiment of the Larisaeans and consequently to justify their privileged position in the contemporary Larisaeian society. Their higher status had to be consistent with deeds of cultural and social benefaction and the foundation of these monasteries was the only means they had to show their good will. We could also remark that this process was in accordance with the pattern that was followed in Constantinople as the emperors- representatives of the civil aristocracy were anxious to establish and finance big monastic foundations.<sup>3</sup> Concerning their remoteness from Larisa, the local administrative centre, we should not be surprised; Magdalino has suggested that the provincial monasteries in that period were "anti-urban in ethos and often in location, for some of the most important were situated miles from the towns on which they depended."<sup>4</sup>

The discovery of numerous archaeological remains in the villages around Ossa gives us a clear view of the prosperity that the region enjoyed during the 11th century.<sup>5</sup> The most prominent religious building dating from that time was undoubtedly the church situated in Vesaina (mod. Aetolofos) and consecrated to the Assumption of the Virgin. Nikonanos maintains that the building is directly connected with the big middle Byzantine basilicas and that it supplements the

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<sup>2</sup> For this event see, chap. II, 26-27

<sup>3</sup> Darrouzes, *Fondations monastiques*, 159-176. The huge monastic foundation of Mangana that was financed by Constantine Monomachos is the finest example of this practice.

<sup>4</sup> Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 151

<sup>5</sup> Agrapiotes, *Scholia*, 79, note 57

relatively small number of the monuments which belong to the same category.<sup>6</sup> According to a verse marble inscription found in the area of modern Agia, the restorer or founder as Nikonanos suggests, of the church was a certain protospatharios Eustathios "who happens to rule this land of Vesaina".<sup>7</sup> Although the title of protospatharios started losing its significance in the 11th century, the presence of such a high-ranking official as administrator in the small village of Vesaina -and maybe of its surrounding areas- is very strange. Given the lack of other relative sources and similar examples, it would be difficult to determine the exact status and responsibilities of this Eustathios. Hild has regarded him as a local landowner who bought at some point the title of protospatharios.<sup>8</sup> Avramea on the other hand has viewed him as a special imperial dignitary and if we turn our attention to the Partitio Romaniae where the region of Vesaina is clearly mentioned belonging to the *episkepsis* of the empress we can perhaps trace in this inscription the earliest allusion to the imperial representative dispatched in Thessaly and charged with the task of administering the imperial domain there.<sup>9</sup>

A few miles north of Vesaina, in modern Stomio, the discovery of an inscription belonging to the same period, testifies the foundation of the church of Panagia Xesporitissa by a certain synkellos Dionysios Kampsorymes, identified by the majority of the scholars with the then metropolitan of Larisa.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the wish of emigrant provincials to spend their wealth for the benefit of their home towns is a practice that can be also attested in Thessaly judging from the construction of a church in Ypate, the expenses of which were exclusively met by Demetrios one of the members of the renowned Katakalon family that offered its services to the imperial governments of the 11th-12th centuries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nikonanos, *Byzantinoi Naoi*, 23

<sup>7</sup> Avramea-Feissel, *'Inscriptions'*, 368-369

<sup>8</sup> Hild, *TH 12 (1987)*, 34

<sup>9</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 157; Nikonanos, *Byzantinoi Naoi*, 16; Carile, *Partitio*, 125-305.

<sup>10</sup> Avramea-Feissel, *'Inscriptions'*, 369-370; Gouloulis, *'Oros'*, 494, note 153

<sup>11</sup> Avramea-Feissel, *'Inscriptions'*, 370-372

Finally, the monastery of St. John the Theologian built, in Athanate (mod. Melivoia at the east foot of Ossa) presented some striking similarities with another monastery of the Virgin located between the modern coastal villages of Stomio and Karitsa.<sup>12</sup>

### **B. The Revolt of the Larisaeans in 1066**

The brief assumption of power by Isaac Komnenos (1057-1059) and the radical reforms he initiated forced his successor Constantine Doukas (1059-1067) to pursue a strict, conservative policy. He secured the support of the people of Constantinople by distributing indiscriminately honorific titles and positions in the imperial and church administration. By initiating a drastic financial retrenchment he paralysed the imperial army and made the whole defensive system heavily dependent on the creation of a broad frontier zone. Finally, and more importantly he totally undermined the effectiveness of the fiscal system by allowing tax-farmers to collect not only the arrears, as before, but also the ordinary revenue from the Byzantine tax-payers.

The situation in the already poverty-stricken Greek provinces further deteriorated with the invasion of the Uzes in the autumn of 1064. Attaleiates records that the invaders were marauding unopposed and that they did not cease their depredations until they were decimated by an epidemic.<sup>13</sup> The indifference of the central government, the imposition of heavy taxes and the abuses of tax-collectors led the provincial population to despair. This intolerable situation led eventually the Larisaeans to rise in an open revolt that broke out in June 1066.

The account of the revolt is provided by Kekaumenos in his *Strategikon* and it is generally considered to be credible given his direct access to important documents that were preserved in the family archives.<sup>14</sup> It is certain that amongst these

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<sup>12</sup> Nikonanos, *Byzantinoi Naoi*, 45-46; Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 81

<sup>13</sup> Attaleiates, 83-85

<sup>14</sup> Kekaumenos, 66-74; Ferluga, *'Kekaumenos et ses sources'*, 364; Lemerle, *'Prolegomenes'*, 76; Cheynet, *Contestations*, 72



documents were the memoirs of his relative by marriage and leader of the revolt Nikoulitzas Delphinas. Kekaumenos throughout his account is favourably disposed towards him and furthermore he gives him credit for managing to prevent the revolt from spreading out of Thessaly.

According to our source, Nikoulitzas (who then held the title of protospatharios)<sup>15</sup> after warning the emperor of a revolt that was to break out in Greece, made several unsuccessful attempts to meet him again and give him further details concerning the plot. After the passing of a month he left Constantinople in disappointment and returned to his house in Larisa from where he sent a new report on the dangers that could arise from the situation. Nikoulitzas did not receive any reply and he additionally felt unable to exercise his authority and put down the revolt, both because he had not imperial permission to do so, and because he had sound reasons to believe that the rebels would retaliate by burning down his property and by harming his family. After receiving into his house a delegation made up of the revolt leaders (John Gremianetes, Gregorios Bambakas) who revealed to him their plans, he decided to approach them, pretending that he was on their side. In a revolutionary meeting that was held at the house of a certain Beriboes he tried to discourage the Vlachs from proceeding further, by stressing that their families and belongings would be exposed to the imperial army. The Vlachs were instantly demoralised but they were soon persuaded by the Larisaeans to remain faithful to their first intentions. Nikoulitzas had by now realised that he had no other choice but to become their leader; he led his troops south towards Pharsala while a small detachment of his army succeeded in capturing the fortress of Kitros (situated in modern Pieria). The next target of the rebels was the strategic Macedonian town of Servia which they managed to occupy after a three day siege.<sup>16</sup> The emperor Constantine being alarmed by the gravity of

<sup>15</sup> Lazarou, 'Exegersi', 106 and Bourdara, 'Kathosiosis', 23 consider Nikoulitzas as strategos of the theme of Hellas with his capital in Larisa although neither the Strategikon nor any other contemporary source support their argument.

<sup>16</sup> Lazarou, 'Exegersi', 109 suggests that Nikoulitzas' decision to take a south direction is to be explained by his plan to save time so as to avoid a possible confrontation with the regular army based in Macedonia. His argument though, is not confirmed by i) the subsequent three day siege of Servia, a town of relatively easy access to the imperial army, ii) the invasion of the Uzes in 1064 (Attales, 87) that had necessitated the dispatching of the available army units to the frontier zone. Therefore,



the situation appeared to be ready to withdraw his excessive demands and to commit himself to pardoning the ringleaders. Nikoulitzas, satisfied with the upshot of the revolt, hastened to form a delegation that would be sent to Constantinople for the implementation of the imperial promises. But instead of receiving a reward for this wise and delicate handling of the affair he was sent into exile in Amaseia where he stayed imprisoned until the accession of Romanos Diogenes (1068).

Ahrweiler has argued that the Vlach uprising belongs to the category of revolts that involved populations already settled in imperial territory but unable to impose on the central government their existence as a distinctive ethnic group.<sup>17</sup> However as recorded by Kekaumenos the rebellion of the Larisaeans is clearly connected with the irrational fiscal policy of Constantine Doukas.<sup>18</sup> Litavrin extending Ahrweiler's argument came round to view the rebellion as motivated not by the fiscal oppression but by the determination of the Vlachs and the Bulgars to shake off the alleged Byzantine yoke.<sup>19</sup> His argument is based both on the wrong, as we shall see further down, interpretation of the term *'Βούλγαροι'* used by Kekaumenos in his account and on the hostile attitude of our author towards the Vlachs that lived in the Byzantine empire.

A closer look at the text shows clearly that the rebellion involved not only the so-called Bulgars and the Vlachs that were recruited by Nikoulitzas in the basin of Pleres-Pamisos and represented its most dense element, but also the inhabitants of Larisa and Trikala. Lemerle has suggested that the liberty of Nikoulitzas' movements indicates that the majority of the Thessalian population had joined the revolt.<sup>20</sup> Throughout his march Nikoulitzas did not meet opposition by those Byzantines that were attached to the imperial regime, an indication of the sense of community that

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Nikoulitzas' south course should be seen as an attempt to recruit as many soldiers as he could in order to have better chances of succeeding in his undertaking. Besides, the region of Pleres where the rebels pitched their camp was probably the focal point of Nikoulitzas' vast property in the Thessalian area.

<sup>17</sup> Ahrweiler, *'Société'*, 119

<sup>18</sup> Kekaumenos, 70 "ἐγὼ ὑπέχω τὸν λαὸν καὶ ἔχω καταλῦσαι τὸν τοιοῦτον μοῦλλον, εἴπερ ἀκούσεις μου καὶ ἐκκόψεις ὅς σὺ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἐποίησας αὐξήσεις καὶ φανερώσεις. ἦν γὰρ πολλῶν νομισμάτων αὐξήσεις καὶ φανερώσεις."

<sup>19</sup> Litavrin, *'Soulèvement'*, 123-124

<sup>20</sup> Lemerle, *'Prolegomenes'*, 48

existed in Thessaly during this period. Shepherds, agriculturists and inhabitants of cities alike, felt that their interests were at great risk and contemplated the revolt as their only means to react in a rigorous way against an authoritarian imperial policy. Thus, the revolt should be seen as a spontaneous movement that stemmed from the financially desperate position of the lower layers of the local population.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, it seemed that their initial revolutionary impetus was not enough for the achievement of their aims. Their movement would have been a flop if they had not included amongst their ranks a powerful representative of the local aristocracy capable of co-ordinating the whole operation. The traditionally prestigious position of Nikoulitzas family in the Byzantine Thessalian society could serve as a guarantee for the successful outcome of the whole project. The rebels were anxious to secure Nikoulitzas Delphinas' participation: they pressed him to take over the leadership of their revolt and after his repeated refusals, they seemed determined to assassinate him.<sup>22</sup>

But why was Nikoulitzas so important for the successful implementation of the rebels' plans to the point of making them enthusiastic on the hearing of his decision to join them ? Ahrweiler has shown that in their attempt to defend themselves against the malpractice of state officials the provincial population sought the support of powerful local figures capable of providing them with chances for a better life and protection.<sup>23</sup> The relationship which Nikoulitzas had developed with the peasants who worked his fields was more complex than the one between a landowner and his paroikoi. He felt compassion for them and as a reward he enjoyed their respect and obedience. In the first meeting with their patron the rebels called him 'father' (Πατέρας) and 'lord' (Αιθένητης) expressing at the same time the view that it would be injustice to proceed in their plans without him.<sup>24</sup> Their complete confidence in him, is reflected by their decision to put him in charge, although they knew that there was

<sup>21</sup> Angold, *Byzantine Empire*, 69 comments that the sense of community existing in provincial towns is caught in the word *συνκαστρίται* that might be applied to their inhabitants.

<sup>22</sup> Kekaumenos, 69

<sup>23</sup> Ahrweiler, 'Société', 117

<sup>24</sup> Kekaumenos, 68; Angold, *Byzantine Empire*, 66; Lefort, *Rural economy*, 113

always a great risk of him betraying them, especially given his concern to preserve his strong connections with the local administration of the theme of Hellas and especially with the imperial court in Constantinople.

Nikoulitzas had personal relations with the emperor Constantine X whom he did not hesitate to warn to withdraw his fiscal measures; after the end of the revolt he was able to circulate freely in Constantinople (*ἐπὶ τέσσαρσι μηνὶ περιπάτει ἐν τῇ πόλει ἀδεῶς*) and although he was temporarily exiled in Amaseia he succeeded in preserving and even extending his privileges thanks to his acquaintance with Romanos Diogenes (1068-1071) and Nikephoritzes who played an active role in the government of Michael VII Doukas (1071-1078).<sup>25</sup> On a local level Nikoulitzas seems to have been able to impose his authority easily, as he was helped by his close associates and spies who reported to him on daily basis (*κατασκόπους εἶχεν πολλούς*). Combining in his hands the civil and the military power he was able not only to control Larisa and its region (*ἀνθρώπους γὰρ ἔχει καὶ λαόν ἴδιον καὶ τὸ κάστρο καὶ ἡ χώρα αὐτῷ πείθεται εἰς ὃ ἄν εἴπῃ*) but also to inspire awe to Andronikos Philocales, *katepano* of Bulgaria, and legitimate representative of the imperial authority in the negotiations with the rebels.

Having elucidated the key role which Nikoulitzas played in the Thessalian revolt it is now appropriate to proceed with the identification of the groups mentioned by Kekaumenos as having participated: the Larisaeans, the Trikalians, the Vlachs and the Bulgars. Although it seems clear that the first two groups constituted the urban element of the revolt, the exact identity of the other two remained until recently problematic.

Examining the role of the Larisaeans first, we can remark that they served as the driving force of the revolt; they conceived the idea of the whole undertaking and threw themselves into the task of implementing it. The leaders of the revolt -Greminiates and Bambakas- judging from their names were Larisaeans with no

<sup>25</sup> His power however, could not justify his climbing to the imperial post as Cheynet suggested (*Contestations*, 288). The eagerness of the inhabitants of Servia to proclaim him emperor is to be explained by their fear which originated in the total absence of a regular army in the area. Besides, once they secured their positions, they started laughing at him.

Vlach blood; together with some of their fellow citizens they organised the plot in secret until they decided to reveal their plans to Nikoulitzas. By persuading the Vlachs to continue the common struggle they even managed to prevent the revolt from collapsing in its first steps.<sup>26</sup>

The issue over the participation of the Bulgars has created a great deal of controversy as Bulgarian and Russian scholars endeavoured to attribute to this term a rather national meaning.<sup>27</sup> It seems that any attempt to connect the Bulgars of Kekaumenos with the subjects of Samuel's empire can lead to serious confusion and misunderstanding of our text. Kekaumenos' mentions that i) the Thessalian city of Servia was situated in Bulgaria, ii) the Vlachs and Bulgars formed important ethnic groups in the region of Larisa-Pleres, and iii) the Vlachs used to spend the summer on the mountains of Bulgaria show clearly that the author of the *Strategikon* had in mind a conception of a Macedonian Bulgaria contrary to a Danubian Bulgaria or the theme Bulgaria. All in all, he does not introduce any differentiation in the geographical, national, administrative and historical notion of Bulgaria as it was conceived by his contemporaries.<sup>28</sup> Regarding the placing by Kekaumenos of the Vlach pasture lands in Bulgaria we can suggest that he probably meant the mountains around Grevena a region that was traditionally inhabited by the Vlachs during the summer. Besides, the bishopric of Grevenon that first appears in the Episcopal lists during the reign of Manuel Komnenos came under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Bulgaria.<sup>29</sup> So the term "*Βουλγαρία*" after the 1020's denotes a much broader geographical area than the one which occupied the empire of Samuel.<sup>30</sup> This practice originated from Basil's

<sup>26</sup> Lazarou, 'Exegersi', 108, note 85, does not make the distinction between the Larisaeans and the Vlachs, considering the former as Vlachs established in Larisa. Nevertheless, in this point Kekaumenos is very clear: "οἱ τε Βλάχοι καὶ οἱ Βούλγαροι, ἀνατραπέντες παρὰ τῶν Λαρισαίων"

<sup>27</sup> XIe *congres international des sciences onomastiques*, 251-252 where Zaimov maintained that Bulgarian population still exists in the northern parts of Epirus and Thessaly: Litavrin, *Kekavmena*, has also suggested that the Thessalian countryside of the 11th century was devoid -with the exception of the urban population of Greeks- and that throughout his march Nikoulitzas encountered only Vlachs and Bulgars!

<sup>28</sup> Kekaumenos, 68, 69, 72; Lemerle, 'Prolegomenes', 22

<sup>29</sup> Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 371-372; Winniffrith, *Vlachs*, 14-15; Wace-Thompson, *Nomads*, 39-68

<sup>30</sup> Kekaumenos, 28: "Σέρβια πόλις ἐστὶν ὄχυρά, ἐν Βουλγαρίᾳ"; Ahrweiler, 'Recherches', 85, note 13; Winniffrith, *Vlachs*, 106 interpreting the terms *Βούλγαροι-Βουλγαρία*, suggests that some of the Vlachs had flocks and families in the mountains of Boulgaria (or Macedonia) and houses in Larisa!

II reconstitution of the Bulgarian church under the autocephalous Archbishopric of Ochrid in partial compensation for his abolition of the Bulgarian Patriarchate. The new Archbishopric came to include under its jurisdiction extended territories which covered Macedonia, Thessaly and Albania. Therefore the term *Βούλγαροι* should be seen as denoting all these Greek populations that came under the newly formed Archbishopric of Ochrid.

Lazarou has alternatively suggested that a great part of these 'Bulgars' had been either Larisaeans, hostages of Samuel since 986 or Bulgarian subjects that were forcibly transplanted in Thessaly as a labour force for the benefit of the great Thessalian landowners.<sup>31</sup> It is very unlikely though, that Basil II would have allowed a newly conquered territory that was situated next to the Balkan frontier to be stripped of its population. On the contrary, immediately after its incorporation into the Byzantine state, Bulgaria was organised administratively into different themes, received the Byzantine system of taxation, and developed the Byzantine forms of peasant dependence. Basil II himself in an effort to avoid further reaction on the part of the Bulgarian people allowed them to continue paying their taxes in kind and at the same rate as before. He also transferred the Bulgarian soldiers to remote areas, uprooted the leading Bulgarian families, dispersed the indigenous population and established in Bulgaria groups of different social-national origin so as to change the existing social structures.<sup>32</sup> So, apart from the fact that the imperial government did not favour such movements, the period between the capture of the Larisaeans (986) and the complete submission of Bulgaria to Basil II (1018) is too long to justify the longing of the Larisaeans for their homeland and their alleged massive migration to Thessaly. But even in this case Kekaumenos familiarity with the conditions that prevailed in Thessaly would have enabled him to specify their exact origin and the circumstances that brought them back to their native land instead of referring to them with a rather general and vague way.

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<sup>31</sup> Lazarou, 'Exegersi', 114-115; Bourdara, 'Kathosiosis', 27-28

<sup>32</sup> Oikonomides, 'Tax exemptions', 317-318, 321



### C. The Vlach Element in Thessaly

The last group mentioned by Kekaumenos in connection with the revolt of 1066 were the Vlachs. Their first appearance in the Balkans is dated back to the first Christian centuries. They may have been Greeks, forced by the barbarian invasions to leave the countryside and their small villages and take refuge in the mountains where they started being of service first to the Romans and afterwards to the Byzantines.<sup>33</sup> Taking advantage of the opening up of important commercial and military roads they took over the maintenance of travel stations and storehouses, worked as innkeepers and guarded strategic narrow passages, checkpoints and communication lines. At the same time with their long-standing service to the Roman army and their subsequent familiarisation with the Roman way of life they became Latinized.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, they never ceased speaking Greek as they kept interacting with the Greek population of the major urban centres. They led a nomadic or rather a seminomadic way of life as during the summer they were occupied with the raising of their stock and the making of farm products (mainly cheese and milk) in the abundant pasture lands of the mountainous ranges of Greece while at the winter they resided with their families in the countryside or in their villages.<sup>35</sup>

The existence of such Vlach villages in Thessaly is confirmed by Anna Comnena<sup>36</sup> who, giving a detailed account of the march of her father towards Larisa with a view to confronting the Normans, mentions his passing through the Vlach village of Ezeban situated according to Agrapiotes by the lake Karla.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Fine, *Early Mediaeval Balkans*, 37 believes that the Vlachs of the 11th century were the descendants of the Greek populations who took refuge in the mountains during the great Slav invasions.

<sup>34</sup> Lazarou, 'Exegersi', 101-102; Kekaumenos, 74 deriving from Cassius Dio, connects them with the Dacians of the Danube region who were finally defeated and subdued to the Romans: "so they leaving from there were dispersed in all Epirus and Macedonia, but the most of them were established in Greece"

<sup>35</sup> Nasturel, 'Valaques Balkaniques', 100-101; Kekaumenos, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Comnena, ii, 24

<sup>37</sup> Agrapiotes, 'Scholia', 74-75

Kekaumenos mentions that Nikoulitzas met the rebels in the house of a certain Vlach called Beriboes in Larisa, information that permits us to suggest that other Vlachs owned houses in the larger cities of Thessaly and especially in Larisa and Trikala. It may be not accidental that a few years after the Thessalian revolt the emperor Nichephoros Botaneiates issued a chrysobull in favour of the bishopric of Stagoi in Western Thessaly; given the brevity of his reign and Botaneiates' concern to consolidate his position to the throne we are allowed to assume that he felt the need to secure the pacification of the local inhabitants and mainly to appease the Vlachs by attributing extended privileges to their bishopric. Almost a century later (April 1163) the *praktikon* that was compiled with the purpose of reporting the assets of the same bishopric mentions several Vlach "*κληρικοπάροικοι*" as cultivating the ecclesiastical lands around the fortress of Stagoi.<sup>38</sup> In 1336 the chrysobull issued by Andronikos Palaiologos to confirm the rights of Stagoi explicitly mentions the presence of Bulgarians, Albanians, and Vlachs.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the census that was conducted by the Turkish authorities in Thessaly in the middle of the 15th century (1454) and later on, in the beginning of the 16th (1506) recorded the existence of Vlach populations (Eflaq, as they were called) in Larisa, Trikala, Pharsala, and Damasi where they constituted almost half of the population and lived in their own neighbourhood.<sup>40</sup> This chronologically later evidence is in absolute accordance with Kekaumenos' statement that the main Vlach winter pastures were on either side of the Pleres river in the triangle which was formed by Larisa, Trikala, and Pharsala.

However, their first appearance in Thessaly may be attested much earlier, at the end of the 10th century (904). The *Miracles of St. Demetrios*<sup>41</sup> describing the meeting of the Saint with Achilleios (the patron Saint of Larisa) in the region of Tempe after the capture of Thessalonica by the Arabs in 904 refer to some pilgrims as *Ἰταλιῶται*. Risos has come to identify them with Byzantine South-Italians who had

<sup>38</sup> Vranousi, *To archaeotero eggrapho*, 29

<sup>39</sup> *MM*, v, 272-273

<sup>40</sup> Beldiceanu-Nasturel, *Thessalie*, 104-156; Kekaumenos, 70

<sup>41</sup> *PG*, v.116, iii, col. 1389



emigrated to Larisa during the second half of the 9th century, perhaps forcibly under the orders of one of the successors of the emperor Nicephoros.<sup>42</sup> Although these *Ἰταλιῶται* may not have exercised the nomadic way of life as did the 11th century Vlachs, they certainly can be designated as such, on the ground that since the 10th century all the Latin-speaking inhabitants of the empire regardless of their occupation and habits were called Vlachs, a name which according to Jirecek was given to them by the Slavs.<sup>43</sup>

The first clear mention of the term "Vlach" in the Byzantine sources is given by Skylitzes, on the occasion of the assassination of the Bulgar prince David "*παρά τινῶν Βλάχων ὁδιτῶν*" in the area between Prespa and Kastoria.<sup>44</sup> In 979 Basil II entrusted to Nikoulitzas authority over the Vlachs of Hellas (*ἀρχήν τῶν Βλάχων τῆς Ἑλλάδος*) in exchange for realising him from the command over the tagma of excubitores that had been previously assigned to him by Romanos (959-963).<sup>45</sup> The formation of a distinct detachment recruited locally and made up of the Vlachs of Greece and its submission to the strongest 10th century military administrator in the theme of Hellas denotes that the Vlachs served at a very early stage as auxiliary troops in the Byzantine army. Almost a century later Alexios I ordered by Botaneiates to suppress Bryennios' revolt used Thessalian horsemen that may have been of Vlach origin given their abilities in animal-raising.<sup>46</sup>

The Byzantines looked on them with distrust and sometimes with envy something which is unlikely to have allowed them to be military organised under their own Vlach leader.<sup>47</sup> In 1082, Alexios I seemed to have made extended use of these

<sup>42</sup> Risos, 'Vlachs of Larisa', 203

<sup>43</sup> Jirecek, 'Die Romanen', 34-35

<sup>44</sup> Skylitzes, 329.

<sup>45</sup> Kekaumenos, 96; Dvoicenko-Markov, 'The Vlachs', 515; This Nikoulitzas (*strategos* of the theme of Hellas, *dux excubitorum*, and *vestes*) was the grandfather of Nikoulitzas Delphinas and Kekaumenos the author and should be identified with the same Nikoulitzas who was in Larisa during the siege of the town by Samuel.

<sup>46</sup> Comnena, i, 20

<sup>47</sup> Ahrweiler, 'Recherches', 33, based on Kekaumenos's mention (Kekaumenos, 71) of Gremeniates as "*πρόκριτον αὐτῶν ἀρχοντα*" maintains that the Vlachs, as other auxiliary troops of the army (Sklavinoi, Meliggoi) were taking orders by their archon. However, the term *πρόκριτος ἀρχων* here takes more a social dimension rather than a military one.

troops. On his way to Larisa he stopped to rest his troops in Ezeba and he may have strengthened his army by recruiting new soldiers from the Vlach inhabitants of the area; <sup>48</sup> in 1091 in his attempt to get together sufficient troops to counter the Petchenegs he commissioned Nicephoros Melissenos to recruit Vlachs from the range of Ainos. <sup>49</sup> His grandson John Komnenos used Vlachs in his campaign in Hungary in 1167; <sup>50</sup> Kinnamos explicitly mentions that Vatatzes' contingent included Vlachs that were considered to be the descendants of the emigrants that once came to the empire from Italy. All in all, the Vlachs were used in the Byzantine army not in great numbers but as special troops that could offer invaluable help thanks to their adaptability in rough war terrain and their use of the Latin language when the need arose to get in touch with people that lived beyond the Danube and conduct informal diplomatic negotiations with them.

The Vlachs' lack of national awareness and the uncertain political loyalties which they occasionally formed enabled them to play an important role in Samuel's empire too. After the capture of Larisa by the Bulgars in 986 a large number of its Vlach population was transplanted to Ochrid where according to Skylitzes they were organised in some kind of military formation. Samuel himself took a Larisaeian wife of Vlach origin and their son and legitimate successor to the Bulgarian throne bore as a supplement to his name the title "*Ρωμανός*" a name which was used to distinguish the Latin-speaking subjects of the empire. <sup>51</sup> The emergence of the second Bulgarian empire after the revolt of the Asan brothers at the end of the 12th century was brought about as a result of the co-operation between the Bulgars and the Vlachs although the latter were reluctant to join the revolt in its first stages. <sup>52</sup>

Risos has recently suggested that the Vlachs of Larisa had developed a strong religious sentiment that stemmed from their worship of the patron of Larisa St. Achilleios and served as the "ideological and spiritual link between the divine

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<sup>48</sup> Winnifrith, *Vlachs*, 111

<sup>49</sup> Comnena, ii, 134.

<sup>50</sup> Kinnamos, 260.

<sup>51</sup> Skylitzes, 329; Risos, *Vlachs of Larisa*, 206.

<sup>52</sup> Wolf, *Second Bulgarian empire*, 167-206.

emperor and the local Vlach contingents.”<sup>53</sup> He also goes further by presuming that the Larisaeans Vlachs who were transplanted to Bulgaria took with them the relics of St. Achilleios which were then rendered the focal point of their religious manifestations. Nevertheless, the Byzantine sources of the 11th-12th centuries do not seem to justify this argument. Kekaumenos, commenting on the distrustful and perverse character of the Vlachs, mentions that they did not believe truly in God (*μήτε εἰς Θεόν ἔχων πίστιν ὀρθήν*) and Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveller in the Byzantine empire in the third quarter of the 12th century notes that the Vlachs “do not hold fast to the faith of the Nazarenes, but give themselves Jewish names” adding that “some people say that they are Jews”.<sup>54</sup> But even if we consider these sources as biased against the Vlachs and the unusual way of life they led, we should remark that it was mainly the cult of St. Demetrios and not that of St. Achilleios which had the added advantage of uniting the Vlachs and the Bulgarians the two ethnic groups that took part in the uprising.<sup>55</sup>

Apart from the accusations that were hurled against the Vlachs concerning their religious indifference they generally did not enjoy any respect and appreciation from the other parts of Byzantine society. The few allusions that are made to them by the sources castigate the predatory way of life they led having as a base of operation the high mountainous ranges of Greece, deplore their practices of national unconsciousness and tax-evasion to the point of justifying military action against them,<sup>56</sup> accuse them of causing disturbance to the monastic community of Athos<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Risos, *Vlachs of Larisa*, 205-206

<sup>54</sup> Adler, *Benjamin*, 11 “They are as swift as hinds, and they sweep down from the mountains to despoil and ravage the land of Greece. No man can go up and do battle against them and no king can rule over them”

<sup>55</sup> Skylitzes, 279

<sup>56</sup> *Noctes*, 145; Comnena, ii, 194: In 1084 the Vlachs aided the Cumans in their war against the Byzantines by guiding them through the narrow passages of Zygos.

<sup>57</sup> Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden*, 163-164. During Alexios’ reign three hundred Vlach families, the women dressed like men were established as *douloparoikoi* and they provided the monks with cheese, milk and wool until the scandal became so great that they were expelled from Athos.

and in one particular incident clearly distinguish them in an unfavourable way from the Roman (Byzantine) nation.<sup>58</sup>

No matter how hostile the attitude of the Byzantines was towards them, the Vlachs managed very soon to prevail in the western part of Thessaly and to acquire their own administrative entity known as Provincia Vlachie in the Partitio Romaniae<sup>59</sup> and as "Μεγάλη Βλαχία"<sup>60</sup> in Choniates' history. The exact location of the main Vlach settlements has been skilfully placed by Magdalino in the general area between Trikala and Domokos and more particularly around the 'kastron' of Phanari which was the most important mediaeval fortress in the western edge of the Thessalian plain.<sup>61</sup> From 1267 onwards the imperial governor appointed to eastern Thessaly was called the *kephale* of Great Vlachia a term which in the 13th century came to comprise the whole of Thessaly.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Bees, *Unedierte*, 60-62. In 1221 in the region of Actolia a local inhabitant complained to the church court for the rape of his daughter by a certain Avrilionos who was an "immigrant of the Romans"

<sup>59</sup> See above note 9.

<sup>60</sup> Choniates, 637; Soulis, 'Vlachia, Megale Vlachia', 89-497; id. 'Thessalian Vlachia', 271-273.

<sup>61</sup> Magdalino, 'Between Romaniae', 96, 100

<sup>62</sup> *MM*, v 4, 420

#### IV. THE NORMANS IN LARISA

##### A. The Appearance of the Norman Threat

From the last quarter of the 11th century the empire was seriously threatened by the appearance of a new and formidable enemy. The Normans under the leadership of Robert Guiscard had concluded the conquest of South Italy and were preparing to invade the Albanian provinces of the Byzantine empire. Robert had made his intention to obtain the imperial throne clear from the very beginning of his campaign. He took advantage of the crisis that plagued the empire after the successive revolts and civil wars that followed the abdication of Michael Doukas in 1078 and he knew that the new emperor Alexios Komnenos was short of troops capable of offering him strong resistance.

In June of 1081 the Normans landed unopposed, occupied Avlona and within a short period of time they were able to capture Durrazo, a strategic stronghold that could offer a base of operations for their future campaigns in Greece. Previously, Alexios had attempted to prevent them from marching southwards, but the battle that was given outside Durrazo in October of 1081 led to a serious defeat of the imperial army. In the spring of 1082 and after Alexios' ingenious distraction Robert was forced to return to Italy so as to confront the German emperor who was about to invade Lombardy.

He left behind however, his son Bohemund whom he charged with the important mission to proceed with the occupation of southern Greece. Bohemund proved to be equal to the task. Not only did he manage to advance southwards and capture Ioannina but he also succeeded in twice defeating the troops of Alexios who meanwhile had reorganised his army and marched against him. These last Norman victories had left Bohemund absolute master of the situation. Additionally, taking advantage of Alexios' return to Constantinople he skilfully divided his army into smaller units so as to reach different towns at a quicker pace. In the north, his

commanders managed to capture the two Polovoi and Skopje whereas he himself tried unsuccessfully to take possession of Achrid, Ostrovo, Berroia and Servia. Towards the end of the summer of 1082 however he took up Bodena and Moglena and went on to pitch his camp in a region northwest of Thessalonica and across the river Vardar, called Aspres Ekklesies, apparently with a view of safeguarding his newly conquered territories against a possible counterattack that could be launched from Thessalonica. After he spent three months there, making sure that the Byzantines were no longer able to operate, given the advent of the winter and the heavy casualties they had suffered in the previous confrontations, he descended southwards and captured Kastoria.

Anna Comnena who is our main source for these events, alludes at this point to the fact that Bohemund thought of Larisa as the ideal place to spend the winter of 1082-1083.<sup>1</sup> His decision seems to have been fairly reasonable if we bear in mind the peculiarities of the Greek landscape. Kastoria did not seem to be a suitable place for the rest of the Norman army due to its heavy winters and the subsequent difficulties in finding the necessary foodstuffs. On the other hand the Thessalian plain, well-protected physically and strategically by the Pindos range in the west and northwest and by Olympos in the north, could offer a safer base for next year's military operations.

Besides, the winning of new territories in the south could act as a stimulus to Bohemund's soldiers to proceed, and only the rumours that Larisa had accumulated immense imperial treasures rendered the capture of the city his main concern.<sup>2</sup> Bohemund was apparently contemplating the conclusion of the occupation of central and southern Greece before he had his attention turned to Constantinople itself. He was aware that the existence of the empire was heavily dependent on the agricultural wealth of Greece and Macedonia and thus he pressed his attack by further occupying Pelagonia.

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<sup>1</sup> *Comnena*, ii, 7-27

<sup>2</sup> Guillaume de Pouille, *Gesta*, 236



Towards the end of the autumn of 1082 he forced his way south passing through the narrow defile that was formed between the Chasia mountains in the northwest part of Thessaly. He easily took possession of Trikala from where he dispatched a unit of his army to storm the nearby town of Tziviskos. The phonetic similarity of the word Tziviskos with the name of the modern town Farkadona- Tsition situated on the road between Trikala and Larisa led most scholars to consider safe the identification of the two places.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, a close inspection of the immediate terrain surrounding Pharkadona clearly shows that this location was defenceless and by no means could be selected to serve as a military stronghold for such an important area. We should rather look for Tziviskos in the area 5 km north of Farkadona where the remains of a Byzantine fortress have been found. Hild who has identified it with Byzantine Tziviskos suggested that the fortress apart from having a clear view of the surrounding region acted as the focal point of the strongholds that were situated across the valley of Enipeus.<sup>4</sup>

After the capture of Tziviskos, clearly Larisa was Bohemund's next target. On this point the account of Anna has been generally viewed as confusing and inaccurate as far as the exact chronological sequence of events is concerned. The confusion has arisen from her successive statements that Bohemund intended to spend the winter in Larisa (*Ὁ δὲ γὰρ Βαιμοῦντος ἐξελθὼν τῆς Καστορίας ἔρχεται εἰς τὴν Λάρισαν κεῖθε παραχειμάσαι βουλόμενος*) and that he did not start besieging the town before the day of the commemoration of St. George (*καταλαβὼν τὴν Λάρισαν κατ' αὐτὴν τοῦ μεγαλομάρτυρος Γεωργίου μνήμην*) a day that until recently was wrongly believed to be the feast of St. George on 23th of April. Glavinas has alternatively suggested that the day indicated by Anna was the 3th of November, the day of the commemoration of the laying down of the Saint's holy relics in the church that was built in his honour in Lydda.<sup>5</sup> This new date can help formulate a solution to

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 354; Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 115 where the main bibliography concerning the identification of Tziviskos is cited

<sup>4</sup> Hild, *TH 12* (1987), 101

<sup>5</sup> Glavinas, *'Normans'*, 40

difficult chronological problems concerning the penetration of Bohemund to Thessaly and the campaign that was launched approximately six months later by the emperor Alexios with the aim of relieving Larisa from the Norman pincer movement.<sup>6</sup>

After the clarification of this ambiguous statement Bohemund's march emerges very clearly: having as his head-quarters Kastoria, he started his Greek campaign in the October of 1082. In less than a month he was able to take possession of Trikala and Tziviskos and at the beginning of November of the same year he appeared before the walls of Larisa and started besieging the town where he intended to spend the following winter. Chalandon's argument based on a mention by Kekaumenos that the eruption of the Vlach (or Thessalian) revolt in 1066 coincided with the emergence of the Norman aggressiveness towards Byzantium suggests that the Vlachs of the Pindos' region in their attempt to avoid their submission to the emperor had reached a secret pact with the Normans and that from 1082 onwards they had been supporting the march of Bohemund in the Greek mainland.<sup>7</sup> However it is clear that Kekaumenos is just reporting the main events that took place in 1066 (together with the appearance of a comet) and therefore the citation of Robert's name in the same chronological context with the eruption of the revolt is to be explained by Kekaumenos' intention to enrich his historical account and make it seem more credible. Besides, as we have seen previously, although the Greek Vlachs had hardly formed an integral part of the Byzantine society they were never particularly ill disposed towards the government of Constantinople which they usually viewed as a potential source of privileges and special treatment during the Komnenian period.

Bohemund very soon realised that the capture of Larisa was the most difficult task the Normans had to encounter since their landing at Greece. The defence of the city had been entrusted to Leo Kephalas a court dignitary who had already distinguished himself in the government of Nichephoros Botaneiates. After his accession to the

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<sup>6</sup> Chalandon, *Essai*, 88 based on the wrong interpretation of Anna's statement has proposed the following hypothesis: Bohemund had reached Larisa on October or November of 1082 with the intention to render the town his winter headquarters; Nevertheless, realizing that it was impossible to storm the town he left a part of his troops blocking it, whereas he himself returned on 23th of April to resume the siege.

<sup>7</sup> Chalandon, *Essai*, 85-86; Kekaumenos, 67

throne Alexios not only kept him in his service but also hastened to confirm his former privileges and in the long term to extend them.<sup>8</sup> The mere fact that Alexios decided to assign to such an experienced official the defence of Larisa shows the key-role which the town played in that period. Indeed, after the loss of the biggest part of Macedonia, Albania, Epirus and parts of Thessaly to the Normans, Thessalonica and Larisa seem to have been the only pockets of Byzantine resistance in Greece capable of blocking the Norman invasion.

### **B. Alexios' March to Larisa**

Kephalas had made known to the emperor the presence of the Norman army around Larisa from the very beginning. He was gradually reduced to despair with all the pressure that he was put under and with successive letters he urged the emperor to come to his aid. No matter how determined and eager Alexios had been to start a new campaign against his sworn foe, the lesson from his recent defeats outside Durazzo and Ioannina taught him to be patient. He entered first into an alliance with the Turkish sultan so as to get rid of his eastern enemy and make sure that under no circumstances would he be distracted on his way to or during his presence in Thessaly. The peace treaty further involved the concession of seven thousands experienced Turk soldiers (under the leadership of Kamyres) whom Alexios desperately needed because of the previous casualties. In March or early April of 1083 Alexios had already concluded the necessary preparations of his army and left Constantinople. Anna does not give any indication as to the road which her father may have used to reach the outskirts of Larisa. However in order to reach Thessalonica it would have been necessary for him to follow the main road i.e. the extension of the via Egnatia, and from Thessalonica to the mouth of Peneios he would have taken the coastal road that goes through Platamon.

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<sup>8</sup> Skoulatos, *Personnages*, 176-178; Kaplan, *Hommes*, 270, 321, 557-558.

The princess gives a reasonably detailed account of her father's entrance into Thessaly:

"having reached the environs of Larisa and crossed through the Kellia mountain leaving on his right the public road and the mountain that the locals used to call Kissavo he descended to Ezeban; this was a Vlach village situated very close to Andronia. From there he went to another large village which is called Plavitzza situated relatively close to the river whose name is something like ..... in this place he pitched his camp after he dug a trench. From there the emperor headed towards the Kepoureia of Delphinas and afterwards to Trikala." <sup>9</sup>

This geographical description of Alexios' march allow us to postulate that he was eager not to advance into Thessalian territory through Tempe, a narrow pass that was formed between Olympos and Kissavos. He expected that Tempe, naturally the most strategic point in Thessaly, would be adequately protected by the Normans and an attempt to force his way through it would be in vain. At a very early stage and particularly since his departure from Constantinople he had realised that the campaign of Larisa was his last chance to drive Bohemund out of Greece. Therefore, he drew up cautiously a war plan, bearing in mind the need to avoid a direct confrontation with the more cohesive, skillful and better equipped Norman army.

The difficulty of identifying most of the place names which Anna cites and the various interpretations that have been given to her passage has permitted scholars to come up with totally different views as to the line of march followed by Alexios. It seems however secure to suggest that a little before his entry into Tempe the emperor turned left to Omolio and following the coastal road he passed through the modern villages of Stomio, Karitsa, Kokkino Nero and Melivoia..

Up to this point and according to the princess' account the emperor had left behind him the mountain of Kellia, the public road (*δημοσίαν λεωφόρον*) and the mountain of Kissavos. But apart from the latter (ancient and mod. Ossa) the exact location of the first two places remained until recently problematic.

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<sup>9</sup> *Comnena*, ii, 24

Regarding the 'mountain of Kellia' first, Vranousi in two of her works has identified it with Pelion. She precludes the identification of Kellia with Kissavos (Ossa) on the ground that Anna clearly distinguishes in her account the two places. In her attempt to justify the mention of Kellia (Pelion, according to her) before Kissavos she has turned to the inaccuracy which sometimes characterises the geographical descriptions which Anna provides in her *Alexiad*. In this way she implicitly suggests that Alexios continued along the coastal road (through Polydendri-Keramidi) even as far as Magnesia.<sup>10</sup>

Avramea notes that the Kellia (or Zagori as they were called in the *Hypotiposis* and the *Life* of St. Christodoulos of Patmos) may cover a much broader geographical area including the northeast part of Pelio, the adjacent Maurovounio and the low crest of Skete between Mavrovounio and Ossa. She also speculates that the distinct mention of Kissavos is not prohibitive for its identification with Kellia given that Anna may have used different names to denote the mass of Ossa (as Kissavos) and its southeast foot (as Kellia). With this reasoning she comes to the conclusion that after Melivoia Alexios passed through Skete (Kentauropolis). From this point he either turned to the interior in the region formed between Kissavos and Maurovounio or continued along the coastal road towards Keramidi (thus making a whole circle) to reach eventually the fortified settlements that were situated by the lake Karla.<sup>11</sup> It seems highly unlikely though that Alexios followed this second course because the configuration of the fringes of Mavrovounio (Polydendri-Keramidi) is even today inaccessible in their northeast part something that would cause unnecessary exhaustion to the imperial troops.

Nikonanos who generally agrees with Avramea's views thinks that it is "inadmissible" to limit Kellia to Pelio after the detection of such a great number of archaeological sites on Kissavos. He underlines the role which the fortress of Skete

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<sup>10</sup> Vranousi, *Mont des Kellia*, 459-464; idem, *Agiologika Keimena*, 136-139

<sup>11</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 59, 84

played in supervising the region between Kissavos and Mavrovounio and suggests that it undoubtedly constituted a major stop on Alexios' march.<sup>12</sup>

Finally Gouloulis having considered the geographical conditions, the local tradition, the literary sources and the archaeological evidence has convincingly enough confined Kellia to the east part of Kissavos between Karitsa and Melivoia.<sup>13</sup> It is appropriate today to adopt this last argument both because it was unlikely for the monastic community that dwelled at Kellia<sup>14</sup> to extend throughout such a great area, up to Mavrovounio and Pelio and because Alexios would hardly have chosen to protract the march of his troops shortly before such a crucial confrontation.

The second obscure point of the passage in question, 'the public road', was until recently considered to be the one which connects Macedonia with Thessaly through the valley of Tempe. Such an interpretation though, does not make any sense due to the fact that Alexios had already abandoned this road when he entered Omolio and passed through Kellia. (*καὶ διελθὼν διὰ τοῦ βουνοῦ τῶν Κελλίων καὶ τὴν δημοσίαν λεωφόρον δεξιόθεν καταλιπών*). Therefore, we should look for this road immediately after the Ossa plateau. The only road which seems to fit in Anna's description is the one which linked the strategically important area of eastern Ossa with Larisa through the modern villages of Aetolofos (Byz. Besaina) Gerakari and Demetra. As the second most important Thessalian road it fulfilled not only commercial and administrative but also military purposes. It was widely used from 4th century onwards every time the invasions in the interior of Thessaly and particularly in the region around Larisa forced the local population to take refuge either in the mountains of Ossa-Mavrovounio or in the fortresses that were dispersed along the coast.<sup>15</sup>

After this clarification, the ambiguous statements of Anna are cleared up and put back in a logical sequence: on his arrival in the region of Agia Alexios decided to turn

<sup>12</sup> Nikonanos, *Byzantinoi Naoi*, 131-132.

<sup>13</sup> Gouloulis, 'Oros', 484

<sup>14</sup> See the last chapter of the present thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 82



left following a southerly direction (through Potamia, Prinias and Placia) in his attempt to avoid the Normans in Larisa, thus leaving on his right Kissavos and the public road.<sup>16</sup>

Anna continues her account by mentioning that her father 'descended' to Ezevan (a Vlach village that was situated close to Andronia) and from there to Plavitza. However none of the Thessalian regions or villages was ever called Andronia. Katsanis has recently argued that on this point Anna repeats the 1st century Roman geographer P. Mela who mistakenly placed the Pthiotian town Andron with the form of Andronia in Magnesia. So, when Andronia is mentioned by Anna she is referring to the region between Demetrias and the modern Velestino.<sup>17</sup> In effect, the only place that fits Anna's description and is situated close to Andronia is the area around lake Karla, the safest possible area that Alexios could have selected to rest his troops. The marshy terrain around Karla would have discouraged the enemy from giving up Larisa and from taking the risk of precipitating a battle there although Alexios' perspicacity had made provision for this possibility also: the military strongholds of Kastri, Amygdale and Kanalia, all situated on the east side of the lake could be used by the Byzantines in case of emergency.<sup>18</sup> Roughly in the same region we can trace Ezeban where Alexios apparently spent some time recruiting new soldiers from the local Vlach population, reviewing his troops and making plans for his future steps.

Continuing his march he made a second stop in Plavitza, on the opposite (west) side of Karla, a territory that in absolute accordance with the *Alexiad* is still watered by several rivers, something which again would cause serious difficulties to any possible assault launched by the cavalry of Bohemund.<sup>19</sup>

Forcing cautiously his way through the hilly area north of the Chalkodonio mountain Alexios reached the Gardens of Delphinas (κηπουρεῖα τοῦ Δελφινᾶ)

<sup>16</sup> Gouloulis, 'Oros', 478-479; Agraphiotcs, 'Scholia', 73-74.

<sup>17</sup> Katsanis, 'Andronia', 89-94

<sup>18</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 113; Agraphiotcs, 'Scholia', 79 note 49 identifies Ezcva with the region between Amygdale-Kalamaki.

<sup>19</sup> Avramea, *op.cit* identifies Plavitza with Potamia in the north-east of Mavrovounio. It is impossible though to accept that Alexios decided to make defensive works so far from Larisa; Glavinas, 'Normans', 38 places it in Chalkodonio.

where he pitched his camp for the second time before his arrival at Trikala. This area, which Anna indicates that was situated between Larisa and Trikala should be placed south of the mountain Titanos if we take into account Alexios' ability to select naturally defended locations for camping. The whole area was well watered by the rivers Pleres, Rogozinos, Apidanos and Enipeus and could provide for the existence and the development of the extensive estate that was evidently possessed by the wealthy and powerful Thessalian family of Nikoulitzas. Recent investigations in the extended area around the valley of Enipeus have permitted Decourt to speak of more than thirty five fortifications, the vast majority of them around the villages of Asmaki and Chtouri. These fortified settlements apparently served as administrative centres and places of refuge for the Thessalian population. They were easily connected with a well preserved access road passing through Vlochos and together with the dispersed high grounds can amply justify the unhindered habitation of the area from at least the 6th to 14th centuries.<sup>20</sup> The exact location of the area that Alexios selected to rest his troops is difficult to identify. Considering though that the traversing of the successive rivers during their flooding period would have been an extremely arduous task to the imperial troops we should perhaps point to the north section of this area i.e. to the junction of the rivers Peneios and Enipeus and around the villages of Vlochos and Metamorphosi.

### C. The Relief of Larisa

At the end of March -beginning of April 1083 Alexios was reoccupying Trikala. Anna surprisingly enough, does not provide any hint as to whether Alexios met any opposition, something which suggests that the Normans were not interested any more in the town and had been engrossed in keeping up their efforts to storm Larisa. The defender of the town Leo Kephalas sent to the emperor a letter in which he described how hard the Larisaeans were hit by the famine. It was Lent and the Christian

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<sup>20</sup> Decourt, '*Enipeus*'

population of the town was devoid of the foodstuffs that "were allowed to the Christians" and started consuming the "not permissible" ones which soon or so became scarce.<sup>21</sup> Under these adverse circumstances Kephalas considered himself to have successfully concluded his mission and with a strict and warning tone he made clear to the emperor that the salvation of the town was now in his hands.

Alexios resolved to confront the enemy with a stratagem. He entrusted the imperial insignia and a large part of his army to his relatives Nikephoros Melissenos and Basil Kourtikios and ordered them to challenge first the Normans outside Larisa to skirmish and then to pretend that they were fleeing in the direction of Lykostomio. According to Alexios's plan these troops were to be stationed on the right of the fortress of Larisa whereas he himself at the head of hand-picked troops would remain hidden on the opposite side. Anna tells us that in his attempt to reach the outskirts of Larisa, Alexios "traversed the defile of Livotanio, by-passed Reveniko, and following the road of the so-called Allage arrived at the left of Larisa". This description although complete during Anna's time, is inadequate to determine the route which Alexios followed so as to reach Larisa and only some rough assumptions can be made here. If we accept that the main road leading from Trikala to Larisa was guarded by the Normans at the height of Tziviskos-Farkadona we are allowed to conclude that at this point Alexios trying to keep his movements secret took a southerly direction, entered into the gardens of Delphinas and proceeding along the banks of the Enipeus reached the defile between the mountains Titanos and Phyllion, the only narrow passage that provided him with access to the fertile plain south of Larisa and which could be identified with the defile of Livotanio mentioned by Anna. Hild has argued that Livotanio was a whole territory situated south of Larisa and identified it with the region or *episkepsis* of Dipotamos mentioned in the *Partitio Romaniae*.<sup>22</sup> Dipotamos as its name reveals and as Tafel-Thomas have noted was located between two rivers and most probably between Peneios and Revenikos (mod. Platanorema) a river that

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<sup>21</sup> Glavinas, *'Normans'*, 40

<sup>22</sup> Hild, *TH 12* (1987) 70; *T-Th*, i 488

rose in Chalkodonio and flowed to lake Karla.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, when Alexios arrived at the extended area of Livotanio he by-passed (*περικόψας*) the river Revenikos and travelled through Allage (a still unidentified place-name) before heading north towards Larisa. Very representative of Alexios advanced strategic skills is the fact that all these movements were greatly facilitated by a diversionary attack launched by a contingent of the part of the Byzantine army that was stationed on the right of Larisa.

The plan of Alexios proved to be a very effective one. The troops that were carrying the imperial insignia were successful in attracting the attention of Bohemund and in drawing the majority of his soldiers away from Larisa. This was enough to allow Alexios to take the initiative and overwhelm the Norman camp. At the same time he made provisions for the troops that were heading to Lykostomio sending to their aid a selected contingent under the command of his ablest archer Georgios Pyrros. At this point both Anna and Gulielmus Apuliensis give virtually the same account i.e. that Bohemund deceived by Alexios stratagem was under the impression that he had forced the emperor to flee from Thessaly.<sup>24</sup> Anna however provides us with a very interesting detail concerning the exact period that these events took place in. She mentions that after his limited success in Lykostomio Bohemund was lying down on an island in the Peneios eating grapes and taking pride in his alleged victory over the emperor. This mention points to a period between July-September and in any case after April 1083 for the beginning of the siege of Larisa. If the siege of the town had started in April as has been widely suggested it is difficult to imagine Bohemund eating grapes in November.

Bohemund "was upset that he was forced to abandon the siege of the town that he had almost captured" and tried with a counterattack to defeat the Byzantines. Such an attempt though was futile given the fact that the latter were now securely protected behind the walls of Larisa. After a few skirmishes he left Larisa and tried to organise

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<sup>23</sup> Hild, *TH 12* (1987) 91; *T-TH*, *ibid*, note 5

<sup>24</sup> Comnena, ii, 28-29; Guillaume de Pouille, *Gesta*, 239

a safe withdrawal. A different account is given by Gulielmus Apuliensis who invoking "the military virtue that always distinguished the Norman army" states that Bohemund defeated the troops that were sent against him under the command of Melissenos and Adrian Komnenos (the emperor's brother) and forced the intimidated Alexios and his allies (Turks, Sauromats) to confine themselves into a pathetic defence operated from the interior of Larisa. When it comes to justifying the flight of the Normans Gulielmus says that they could no longer besiege Larisa as the hinterland of the town laid deserted after the successive plundering and it was not enough of providing them with the necessary foodstuffs for the continuance of such a difficult operation.<sup>25</sup>

At any rate Bohemund followed the right bank of Peneios, then took a northerly direction and passing through an overgrown plain he entered into "the palace of Domeniko" a defile that is to be identified with the narrow passage between the mountains Zarko and Trochalo and crossed by the river Xerias.<sup>26</sup> There, in the area between the villages of Domeniko and Damasi he pitched his camp and waited for the possible reaction that was to come from the Byzantines. Bohemund was defeated once again this time by Alexios' relative Michael Doukas and his troops fell in disarray. They went the wrong way and through the narrow pass of Kalamakio reached Trikala where they met their colleagues who meanwhile had arrived from Lykostomio. After spending a short time there they abandoned Thessaly once and for all.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 88

<sup>27</sup> Zonaras, xviii, 235 mentions Larisa amongst the towns captured by the Normans but his account should not be given credibility.

#### IV. LARISA IN THE 12th CENTURY

##### A. Economic Prosperity

The political instability which characterised the best part of the 11th century was followed by a period of strong Komnenian government that lasted a century and managed to a considerable extent to restore the Balkan frontier to the status that had been brought about by Basil II. Alexios and his immediate successors John and Manuel Komnenos launched repeated expeditions with a view to reducing the aggression of the empire's Balkan enemies. Thus the fear of the frequent Petcheneg raiding ceased to exist after their pacification in 1091, while Serbia and Hungary were subservient to the Byzantines well before the end of Manuel's reign.

The internal peace that was achieved a little time after the accession of Alexios to the throne brought about a feeling of security to the Greek population of the empire and paved the way for the economic prosperity which is well attested by the 12th century sources.<sup>1</sup> During that century both the Ionian and the Aegean coasts suffered regularly from the growth of the Venetian and Norman fleets in the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet neither Thessaly in general nor its interior in particular seemed to have been affected by their depredations to the same extent suffered by other towns in mainland Greece.

It is true that the Norman invasion of 1147 set back the attempts that had been made at developing southern Greece. However, there is no mention in the sources for similar attacks on the Thessalian coasts and by no means should the sackings of Corinth and Thebes be seen as an incident which generated chain reactions with serious negative economic consequences for the rest of Greece.

The theme of Hellas-Peloponnesos to which Larisa and its surrounding area belonged since the 11th century consisted of several administrative entities with a varying degree of influence on the provincial administration. These entities were

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<sup>1</sup> Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 140



usually formed and developed around important towns which fulfilled the function of local markets for the rural population. Therefore, with the local economy based predominantly on agriculture and with a manufacturing capacity limited to the making of implements for the cultivation of the land as well as to very basic commodities, it seems highly unlikely that the district of Larisa would have felt any serious pressure from disturbances in other parts of Greece. The diversification that marks the way that each one of these smaller geographical units was treated by the central government and its representatives is indirectly confirmed by the complaints of Michael Choniates, metropolitan of Athens in the late 12th century. Although he was writing at a very late stage -the 'decomposition de l' empire Byzantin' had already taken its course- Choniates' grievances, regarding the discrimination against his diocese during the tax-collection and the performance of labour services, may reflect patterns of provincial policies that had roots in a much earlier period.<sup>2</sup>

Another factor which contributed to the prosperity of the Thessalian towns during the 12th century was the gradual economic infiltration by the naval sea powers, Venice, Pisa and Genoa by way of conducting free trade in all the major ports of the empire. As early as 1082 Alexios Komnenos, conceded extended trade privileges to the Venetians as an exchange for the services they provided him during his struggle against the Normans. The chrysobull that was issued to confirm these privileges included Demetrias amongst the towns in which the Venetians were entitled to operate.

At this early stage and before the appearance of Almyros it is difficult to determine with absolute certainty the centre for exporting the surplus mainly generated from the agricultural production in the vicinities of Larisa and Pharsala. The safety which the Pagasitic Gulf could provide, rendered Demetrias the most favourable choice as the main Thessalian port. Yet on the one hand the considerable number of military strongholds in the east side of Ossa that facilitated, as we have seen, Alexios' march to Larisa in 1082, and on the other the Byzantine settlements

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<sup>2</sup> Herrin, *'Collapse'*, 196-199

around the valley of Tempe (Lykostomio, Omolio) suggest that ports situated in the bay of Agia and in Platamon should not be ruled out as possible locations for a harbour of Larisa. The significance of the latter is also confirmed by the contemporary sources. Describing the conditions that prevailed in the Greek mainland during the first half of the century, the Arab traveller Al-Idrisi singled out Platamon as one of the main commercial centres that laid along the sea route which joined Greece and Constantinople and as a town which had "magnificent tall buildings".<sup>3</sup> But the same area was also of vivid interest for the catering of the needs of the old-age homes (gerokomeia) in Constantinople. The *Partitio Romaniae* reveals that these homes owned large domains (episkepseis) between Berroia and Platamon.<sup>4</sup>

At any rate from the second decade of the century all the Thessalian ports, including Demetrias, started losing their significance for the benefit of Almyros, a port located a few miles south of Demetrias.<sup>5</sup> It is extraordinarily surprising that from this point onwards Demetrias is no longer mentioned in the private documents of the Italian cities, an indication of the sudden break in the economic role which the town had traditionally played in this area. The exact circumstances under which the town of Almyros emerged as well as the considerations that led to its eventual predominance over other locations as the main Thessalian export centre are far from clear. It seems though, that its proximity on the one hand to the west Thessalian plain around Pharsala and on the other to the mouth of the Pagasitic Gulf would have played a decisive role for its selection as the base of the Italian commercial operations in central Greece.<sup>6</sup> With two spacious and well-protected harbours, and with the establishment of Venetian and Pisan traders at the beginning of the century (around 1110) and of Genoese half a century later (1157) the town acquired at a very early stage a western cosmopolitan character.

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<sup>3</sup> Idrisi, 295

<sup>4</sup> Carile, *Partitio*, 222; Zonaras, iii, 744-745.

<sup>5</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 166-173

<sup>6</sup> Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 145

As the Italians were mainly interested in conducting a freight trade carrying humble and heavy commodities (such as grain, cotton, and linen) the Thessalian free peasants and *paroikoi* were stimulated to intensify their agricultural production and put more of their products on the market.<sup>7</sup> This extended financial network would also have benefited both the lay and ecclesiastical landowners who saw their wealth growing but who were most probably prevented from reinvesting their money in the land owing to insuperable difficulties concerning the deficient methods of irrigation, the primitive level of the agricultural equipment at their disposal, and finally their inability to improve the poor quality of the available seeds. It seems however, that neither the peasants nor the individual landowners were capable on their own of bringing to an end these commercial activities. Herrin has pointed out the participation of another distinct group, that of the Greek merchants, who acting as middlemen, were buying the finished products from the local population and were reselling them to the Italian exporters. Although the main volume of trade was in Italian hands, the great variety of economic mechanisms, the scope for making profit and the enormous demand for agricultural products by the biggest towns and especially Constantinople not only gave latitude but also necessitated the active participation of Greeks in the whole process. According to Italian documents concerning trade in Almyros, the most adventurous of them acted at the same time with the Italians as local sailors undoubtedly co-operating with their compatriots in the mainland for the transport of Greek products overseas.<sup>8</sup>

But was there any connection between the trade activities that were conducted almost exclusively in Almyros and the prosperity of Larisa? The answer lies again to some extent on the intensification of the agricultural production: after the needs of the Italian exporters and of the rural population were covered, the remaining surplus was inevitably made available to the greatest local market, Larisa, while the buying power of the archontes kept this procedure going. If Almyros was considered to be the

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<sup>7</sup> Adler, *Benjamin*, 11, also attests the presence of a Jewish colony of 400

<sup>8</sup> Herrin, 'Collapse', 200

commercial centre of Thessaly during the 12th century Larisa was certainly the agricultural one. The town prospered as the focal point of a rich agricultural area with commerce and manufacturing to have playing a minor role.<sup>9</sup> Idrisi informs us that Larisa was a large town "surrounded by fig-trees, vineyards, and arable land" while descriptions suggesting a similar economic prosperity are given for Demetrias, Trikala and Almyros.<sup>10</sup>

Benjamin of Tudela on the other hand does not provide us with a clear picture concerning the conditions that prevailed in the Thessalian towns around 1165.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin refers sketchily to 'Sinon Potamo, a town in the fringes of Wallachia' which has not yet been identified. It was most probably -if we believe Benjamin's statement that it was one's day journey from Ravenica (mod. Aulakion, a few miles east of Lamia)-somewhere close to Pharsala. Another town mentioned by Benjamin, Gardiki (south of Almyros) appears to have been almost devoid of inhabitants with the exception of a small number of Greeks and Jews.

At the same period however the situation was totally different for the homonymous town (mod. Palaiogardikio) that laid on the road from Trikala to Larisa. From a letter which Michael Choniates addressed to his colleague Epiphanius, bishop of Gardikio and Peristera, we are allowed to conclude that the town if not prosperous was at least considerably self-sufficient. Gardiki was renowned for the manufacture of agricultural implements especially ploughs, which were necessary for the cultivation of land. The mere fact that Choniates turned for help to such a remote area from Athens, reveals the level of economic prosperity which Thessaly had managed to achieve.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in another letter he alludes in a rhetorical way to the fact that Thessaly together with Macedonia and the lowlands of Thrace constituted the most important grain-producing areas that provided the population of Constantinople with

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<sup>9</sup> Angold, *Byzantine Empire*, 250

<sup>10</sup> Idrisi, II, 292, 296

<sup>11</sup> Adler, *Benjamin*, 11

<sup>12</sup> Michael Choniates, II, 69

generous amounts of foodstuffs. Choniates also does not fail to mention the quality of the Pteleatic wine being sent to the capital.<sup>13</sup>

Although Benjamin does not include Larisa in his geographical narrative, he does refer to the nearby town of Vesaina as having a community of one hundred Jews. Vesaina is not recorded as having developed any form of silk manufacture and the role which the Jews played there remains an obscure point. However, their presence in Vesaina during that particular period is a safe sign of commercial activity and economic vividness that comes in sharp contrast with the poverty of its bishopric which is attested in a letter which Psellos addressed to the praetor of Hellas-Peloponnesos during the 11th century.<sup>14</sup>

The literary evidence provided by Michael Choniates and the two foreign travellers is adequately supplemented by the existence of ecclesiastical buildings whose construction has been dated after the first half of the century. This chronological framework is not so accidental, given the favourable policy which Manuel Komnenos followed towards the church. His fear of losing the control of the political situation in the early part of his reign made him extremely generous. In 1148 Manuel confirmed with the chrysobull *'ἱατήρ'* all the immovable property of the bishopric of Stagoi in western Thessaly and in 1163 extended these privileges further by conceding to the bishopric the right to employ forty six tax exempt peasants (*κληρικοπάροικοι*) for the cultivation of its landed property.<sup>15</sup> This general tendency of benefiting the church might well have influenced local military and political officials or even powerful landowning families to proceed with similar deeds of religious benevolence. We saw previously that these landowners found themselves unable to invest their money to improve the production of their fields, a reality which rather made them prefer to bequeath, donate and in the best of the cases to hoard and display their wealth.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, ii, 83

<sup>14</sup> Michael Psellos, *Epistolai*, 344-345

<sup>15</sup> Astruc, 'Stagoi', 216-217

<sup>16</sup> Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 156

The practice of the display of wealth is clearly revealed by an inscription dated from 1161 and commemorating the foundation of a church consecrated to the Virgin Mary and situated in Vitouma, a region southwest of Stagoi. The founders of the church, Konstantinos Tarchaniotes (a member of the renowned Tarchaniotes family dating back to the 10th century), his wife Zoe and the sebastos Andronikos -undoubtedly prominent figures in the local society-took pride in financing the construction from the income of their own personal property (*ἐξοικίων ἀναλωμάτων καὶ κόπων*) with the hope 'to be absolved from their sins.'<sup>17</sup>

An analogous building activity can be attested in eastern Thessaly and more particularly in the vicinity of Agia; it appears also that the practice of founding and maintaining churches and oratories continued during the last decades of the century. The church of Panagia Vilika situated at the foots of modern Melivoia and along the sea-coast presents close architectural similarities with the monuments of the capital. The other two important religious buildings, of Agios Georgios in Kastri and the church situated in the modern village of Kokkino Nero, are both dated by Nikonanos roughly at the end of the century. At the same period can also be dated the range of hermitages (*asketaria*) that were possibly centred around the complex of Agioi Anargyroi, east of Agia.<sup>18</sup>

## B. Local Administrative Mechanisms

No matter how wealthy the vicinity of Larisa might have been, the political upheaval which followed the death of the emperor Manuel in 1180 affected not only the already poverty stricken Anatolian provinces but also the relatively prosperous Balkan ones, such as the theme of Hellas-Peloponnesos in which Larisa belonged. The root of the trouble however for this particular theme may be traced back to 1094, when Alexios Komnenos introduced a radical package of military reforms concerning

<sup>17</sup> Avramea-Feissel, *Inscriptions*, 372-374

<sup>18</sup> Nikonanos, *Byzantinoi Naoi*, 51-53, 64-69, 108-114, 123-138



the provinces. Alexios had contemplated restoring the military power of the empire which had been lost since Basil II. His idea was to unite both the military and civil functions of the themes and to put them under the overall authority of the military orientated doukes-katepano (an equivalent of the strategos of the 7th century). However the pressing needs for economising drove him to maintain the previous civil administrative status at least in the three European circumscriptions (themes of Hellas-Peloponnesos, Thessalonike-Voleron-Strymon, and Macedonia-Thrace) which were threatened less directly after the pacification of the empire's Balkan enemies and thus were less likely to require great numbers of military units for their defensive needs. In effect the theme of Hellas-Peloponnesos with its capital at Thebes never ceased to be under the jurisdiction of its civil administrator (known as praetor) while the megas doux who was considered to be the military leader of the theme -after its unification with the naval command- exercised only a nominal power as he was primarily concerned with the supervision of the imperial fleet and the protection of Cyprus and the Aegean islands from the pirates and the vindictive Venetian navy.<sup>19</sup> Thus the inhabitants of the region of Larisa, a traditionally mainland area, were not asked any more to contribute to the maintenance of the local military units but to pay the ploimon for the upkeep of either the imperial fleet or the less significant local naval squadrons which took over the defence of the main ports. If such a squadron existed in Thessaly it would most probably have been stationed in Demetrias or Almyros and its command, according to Ahrweiler would have been entrusted to the local archontes.<sup>20</sup>

The administrative situation however, shows a great deal of variety as we approach the end of the century. The traditional geographical division between the rough western and the fertile eastern Thessalian plateau dictated the fiscal subordination of Stagoi and apparently of a big part of the northwest of Thessaly to the theme of Servia.<sup>21</sup> The western part of Thessaly came to be designated as

<sup>19</sup> Ahrweiler, *Byzance*, 277 maintains that the capital was Athens

<sup>20</sup> *op.cit.*, 225

<sup>21</sup> Astruc, 'Stagoi', 230

provincia Vlachie or Blachie. It constituted a geographically broad administrative entity as its frontiers were extended to Pindos in the West, to Ypate in the South and to the region of Grevena in the north, while its appellation is to be attributed to the concentration there of the majority of the Vlach population that was settled in Thessaly.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand the district of Larisa kept its dominant role in the 12th century Thessalian administrative system as it constituted, according to the Partitio Romaniae, one of the seven *oria* of the theme.<sup>23</sup> This term which is found only in the maritime circumscription designated according to Ahrweiler a small territorial and administrative subdivision which also included coastal regions.<sup>24</sup>

As we noticed before the resources of the *oria* were destined to support the imperial navy and in this context they seem to have differed from another category of administrative entities which were widespread in Thessaly; the *episkepseis* (the Greek term that is used in the chrysobull of the emperor Alexios favouring the Venetians) or *pertinentia* (the Latin term which applies in the *Partitio Romaniae*) were large domains usually comprising a town and its immediate fertile vicinity. They belonged to the Crown and it was up to the emperor to bestow them on distinguished magnate officials in Constantinople or allot them to the great *euagois oikoi* for their provisioning and profit.<sup>25</sup> It is very clear that the *episkepseis* in the name of the empress covered the vast majority of the Thessalian fertile plain with the very reasonable exemption firstly of the immediate hinterland of Larisa -which was destined to cater for the needs of its urban population and lay/ecclesiastical officials- and secondly of the district surrounding the valley of Enipeus which was traditionally 'reserved' by the great landowning families, as for example that of Nikoulitzas. The zone of the Thessalian *episkepseis* covered all the area east of an imaginary diagonal line that started from Ypate and with a northeast direction ended up in the southern fringes of the Ossa mountain. This zone was composed of the *episkepseis* of Vesaina,

<sup>22</sup> Carile, *Partitio*, 283; *Th*, i, 265; Zakythinos, '*Dioiketike Diaeresi*', 44

<sup>23</sup> Carile, *Partitio*, op.cit. The other four always according to the same text were that of Athens, Thebes-Euripos, Patras, Methone, Corone, Argos-Nauplio.

<sup>24</sup> Ahrweiler, *Byzance*, 277

<sup>25</sup> Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 234

Ravenica, (roughly the area north of the Chalkodonio mountain) Demetrias, Pharsala, two Almyroi, Domokos and Ypate. <sup>26</sup> The continuous exploitation of the above mentioned areas by the Crown has been proved not only by the existence of a royal protospatharios in Vesaina from the 11th century onwards but also by a late Roman inscription which mentions a certain Apollophanes, procurator hereditarum (charged with the administration of the imperial domain) of the region of Pheres (mod. Velestino, very close to Demetrias) with all the arable land and its immovable property. <sup>27</sup> So the main difference between the inhabitants of the *orio* of Larisa (and maybe of the provincia Vlachiae) and those of the imperial *episkepseis* was that the former were paying their taxes to the fisc for the maintenance of the navy and later on for the well-being of the Constantinopolitan population while the latter provided directly for the prosperity of the capital's *oikoi*. The administrative map of Thessaly was supplemented by the *chartoularaton* of Ezeros, a small circumscription that was responsible for provisioning horses and pack-animals to the imperial army. <sup>28</sup>

Although the theme of Hellas-Peloponnesos showed a considerable level of prosperity, the first signs of decline were revealed after the bad decision of the emperor John Komnenos (1118-1143) to divert all the money that was levied from the naval themes to the capital. The money ended up in the state's treasury which did not take, in its turn any provision for the maintenance of the navy and the small military units. The successful campaigns of Manuel in the Balkans and the upkeep of firm imperial control in Bulgaria covered up the dramatic consequences of this major change. However his death in 1180 and the revolt of the Asan's brothers in 1186 initiated a period of general decline with the brief interval of Andronikos Komnenos' reign. The sole power of the theme, as we have already seen, was after Alexios' reforms in the hands of the praetor or krites. He was appointed from the central government and his tenure lasted for three to four years. Yet, the mere fact that he was mainly concerned with fiscal and judicial affairs, even if he actually resided in

<sup>26</sup> Zakythinos, *'Dioiketike Diaeresi'*, 43-49

<sup>27</sup> Avramea, *'Kteseis'*, 2; Magdalino, *Manuel Komnenos*, 168, not.238

<sup>28</sup> Magdalino, *op.cit.*, 235; *idem*, *'Chartoularata'*, 34.

his circumscription, alienated him from any form of military administration. The only military unit at his disposal was under the command of one of his officials (protokentarchos) while the interior of the theme and possibly the narrow passes around the region of Larisa were protected by the drouggoi, small contingents that were recruited forcibly at a local level.<sup>29</sup> However, the swarm of tax-officials that were dispatched to the theme after the commutation of food supplies and labour services into monetary levies is mentioned by the sources to have abused not only the local population but also the soldiers of these local militia. Ethymios Malakes, bishop of Ypate complained about the way one of these soldiers was treated; the soldier was ordered by a recruiting official to join his garrison and after he left, his lands were expropriated.<sup>30</sup> Similar complaints concerning the unfair tax-allocation, the heavy and multiple levy of maritime taxes, the excessive epereiui and proskynitikia (both irregular taxes) and the inaccurate measurement and assessment of land by the tax-officials were expressed by Michael Choniates.<sup>31</sup> It is however far from clear if they all applied to Larisa. The wealthy population of Thebes refused on at least one occasion to accept the governor and his troops and it would not have been surprising if the inhabitants of Larisa had proceeded to similar actions, in a desperate attempt to defend themselves against the encroachments of the tax-officials.

### C. The Revolt of Kamytzes and the Occupation of Thessaly by the Latins

Nevertheless, the lawless atmosphere of the Greek provinces of the empire had given rise to serious centrifugal tendencies that threatened to undermine the authority of the central government. Leo Sgouros in Argos-Nauplio and Leo Chamaretos in Monemvasia took advantage of the relative isolation of Peloponnesos and managed to establish independent lordships. They imposed heavy taxes on their subjects and defied the last pockets of imperial authority in Greece. The region of Larisa was not

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<sup>29</sup> Herrin, *Realities*, 266-267

<sup>30</sup> Euth. Malakes, i, 73-74

<sup>31</sup> Herrin, *Collapse*, 196-199

affected by similar separatist movements maybe due to its proximity to the praetors' zone of power but the revolt of Kamytzes that broke out in the beginning of the 13th century and disrupted an extended area from northern Macedonia to the Isthmus of Corinth definitely took its toll amongst the local population.

Kamytzes was a senior military dignitary always attached to the imperial regime. In 1185 he took part in the Byzantine campaign against the Normans of Sicily who had meanwhile occupied Thessalonika, and the following year he left all his large property to the emperor Isaac Angelos (1185-1195) for the suppression of Branas' revolt. However, his successive failures against the Bulgaro-Vlachs in 1187, and the crusaders in 1190 as well as the mutiny of his army during a campaign in Bulgaria in 1196 jeopardised his eminent career and caused the dissatisfaction of Alexios III Angelos (1195-1203).<sup>32</sup>

In 1199 the emperor sent him in charge of a campaign against Ivatzes-Alexios who had meanwhile violated his agreements with the Byzantines. The outcome of the battle that was given in Baktounion was disastrous for the imperial army and resulted in the capture of Kamytzes. He spent a year in Bulgaria making repeated appeals to the emperor to ransom him but the distrust that Alexios felt for him and his eagerness to get rid of a possible menace for his throne led him not only to reject those appeals but also to confiscate his property and to imprison his wife and child. The ransom was finally paid by his son-in-law Chrysos, who facing the refusal of the emperor to compensate him changed his plans and entered into an alliance with Kamytzes. They were both enraged by the defiant attitude of the emperor and as a result they openly revolted against him. Nichetas Choniates, our main source for this revolt provides us with two different viewpoints on the subject. In his encomium of Alexios he dismisses Kamytzes as an Absalom who turned against his emperor and father and accuses him of being impatient concerning the payment of the ransom and of acting cruelly against his compatriots. On the other hand, in his *Historia* Choniates deplores

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<sup>32</sup> Varzos, *Komnenoi*, 690-713

-although in an indirect way- the decision of the emperor to abandon Kamytzes and confiscate his property.<sup>33</sup>

Savvides has argued that the rebels' principal objective was to establish an autonomous state in north-western Macedonia and Thessaly encouraged by the state of anarchy and chaos which prevailed in the empire on the eve of the fourth crusade.<sup>34</sup> It is nevertheless far from clear whether it was his personal ambitions or indeed his bitterness against the emperor, which was the crucial factor that led him to revolt. It is also very doubtful how viable a state could have been that based its existence on a Byzantino-Bulgarian coalition of a temporary character.

At any rate, as Choniates informs us, the two rebels, whose base of operations was the town of Prosakos, conquered Pelagonia and Prilep and then entered the Thessalian plain through the Tempe valley and marched down to the Isthmus 'creating disturbances in Hellas and making the Peloponnesos unstable.'<sup>35</sup> Kamytzes managed to retain his position in these territories for almost a year (winter 1201-1202). In the winter of 1202 Alexios III, alerted by the gravity of the situation, organised a campaign against the rebels.<sup>36</sup> He assigned to Ionopolites (parakoimomenos and one of his ablest generals) the task of opposing Kamytzes while he himself broke the alliance promising gifts and a prestigious marriage to Chrysos. Pelagonia and Prilep were given back to the emperor while Kamytzes finding himself unable to offer serious resistance against the imperial troops left Thessaly taking refuge in the Macedonian town of Stanon. His rebellion, although suppressed easily, showed how weak the imperial control over the Balkans was.

In the spring of 1204 the Crusaders captured Constantinople and the total occupation of Greece seemed to be only a matter of time. At the same time Sgouros, having established a firm control over north-eastern Peloponnesos, extended his independent state by further occupying Attica, Boieotia, east Phokis, and the central

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<sup>33</sup> Choniates, *Orationes*, 107; idem, *Historia*, 513-514, 533

<sup>34</sup> Savvides, 'Kamytzes', 150

<sup>35</sup> Choniates, *Historia*: 533; Efrain, 215

<sup>36</sup> Brand, *Byzantium*, 275-276



part of Eubolia. Well before the end of the year he passed through Thermopylae, traversed Oete (a mountain in the south part of Thessaly) and reached Larisa with the aim of meeting Alexios III who had meanwhile fled Constantinople.<sup>37</sup> Although both Acropolites and Skoutariotes refer to Corinth as the meeting point of the two men, the chronological proximity of Choniates to the described events and the fact that Alexios and his wife were subsequently captured by the Franks in Thessalonica (a place closer to Larisa than to Corinth) establishes beyond any doubt that Larisa has to be favoured as the meeting place.<sup>38</sup> In Larisa Alexios III married his daughter Eudocia to Sgouros, an act that has to be seen more as an agreement for the fulfilment of their mutual interests. Savvides has argued correctly that Alexios sought the military support of his son-in-law in his attempt to restore himself to the throne while Sgouros received the title of *protosevastos* and thus a legitimacy in his claims for the territories he had already acquired in a rather authoritarian way.<sup>39</sup>

However around the end of 1204 their hopes were shattered as the Frankish army of Boniface was heading southwards in the direction of Larisa. Sgouros abandoned the imperial couple in the town and marched towards Thermopylai where he intended to pitch his camp. Boniface easily made his way southwards and the warm welcome he received from the inhabitants of Thebes shows clearly how discontented the Greeks were with the Byzantine Administration. It is beyond any doubt that Larisa had very strong fortifications; when the Lombard princes revolted against the Latin emperor after the death of Boniface in 1207 they selected Larisa as the most suitable place to defend themselves.<sup>40</sup> However it seems highly unlikely that the town would have offered resistance. Apart from the fact that the local militia would have found themselves outnumbered, their morale would have been too low to enable a successful defence of the town.

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<sup>37</sup> Choniates, *Historia*, 608; Efrain, 235, 247

<sup>38</sup> Acropolites, 13; Skoutariotes, 435; Kordoses, *'Kataktese'*, 70

<sup>39</sup> Savvides, *'Sgouros'*, 66

<sup>40</sup> Villeardouin, 32

According to Choniates, Boniface became master of an extended coastal zone including amongst other areas the plain of Larisa and the region of Almyros and he was very soon capable of collecting taxes from his Greek citizens. Yet, the western part of Thessaly, known as *Megale Vlachia*, remained in the hands of a mysterious toparch whom Choniates, surprisingly enough does not name at all. The problem of his identification has not been resolved yet but the relative discussion has followed three different directions. Longnon has suggested that Choniates alluded most probably to Michael Doukas who initially offered his services to Boniface, but he later fled and established the Despotate of Epiros.<sup>41</sup> It is very unlikely though for a historian writing in the court of Nicaea to have left out the name of the most active competitor of the exiled government in its struggle to regain the imperial throne.

Cheyne on the other hand has identified this anonymous toparch with Manuel Kamytzes or Konstantinos Maliassenos.<sup>42</sup> However, after the suppression of his revolt Kamytzes was pushed back to Macedonia and it is difficult to believe that he could make such a spectacular comeback. As for Maliassenos we can notice that the influence of his family was originally limited in the area of Mount Pelion and by no means could the Maliassenoi have exercised their authority over the rough pastoral peoples-whether Vlach, Greek, Slav, or Albanian-who lived on the mountainous margins of Byzantine society in western Thessaly and northern Greece.

All the evidence points to the identification of this anonymous toparch with a member of a local aristocracy that apparently owned the winter and summer pastures around the Pindus area and could control to a reasonable extent the predatory energies of these rough pastoralists. The family of Taronas, as Magdalino has demonstrated belonged to the provincial town aristocracy of northern Greece and it was deeply involved in the transhumant rhythms of the economy of the area. Therefore it would be appropriate to identify this toparch with a member of Taronas family that could act as a Greek local dynast (as Sgouros, Chamaretos) and at the same time as the

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<sup>41</sup> Longnon, *L'empire Latine*, 69

<sup>42</sup> Cheynet, *Contestations*, 153

intermediary between the imperial government and the most autonomous elements in the local society.<sup>43</sup>

With the occupation of Thessaly by the Latins, the *thema* of Larisa, the *episkepsis* of Neopatras and the domains of the empress (*pertinentia imperatricis*) in Vesaina, Domoko, Pharsala, two Almyroi, Revenica and Demetrias passed in the hands of Boniface of Montferrat and his vassals.<sup>44</sup> The traditional view is that the empress in question was Euphrosyne wife of Alexios III Angelos (1195-1203).<sup>45</sup> But if we accept Oikonomides' arguments that the *Partitio* was drawn up on the basis of fiscal records of the restored regime of Isaac II and his son Alexius IV (1203-1204) we can suggest that the empress mentioned in the *Partitio* was Isaac's widow Maria whom Boniface married after the conquest of Constantinople.<sup>46</sup> Later in 1210 she appears to have remained in a possession of a substantial part of her *pertinentia*.<sup>47</sup> In 1204 different parts of Thessaly were granted by Boniface as fiefs to noble princes but their position was precarious and it was a situation that was not to last long.

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<sup>43</sup> Magdalino, *'Between Romaniae'*, 100-102

<sup>44</sup> Carile, *Partitio*, 283

<sup>45</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 136, 157, 172

<sup>46</sup> Oikonomides, *'Décomposition'*, 1-28

<sup>47</sup> Magdalino, *'Between Romaniae'*, 97, note 37.

## VI. ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

### A. Ecclesiastical Organisation

Christianity would have spread in the district of Larisa during the earliest centuries AD. According to later tradition, St. Achilleios was the first metropolitan of Larisa and worked intensively for the promotion of Christianity in the province of Thessaly during the reign of Constantine I.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of the archaeological evidence we can suggest that the new religion advanced through the big urban centres. Both the tomb inscriptions that were found in Larisa and its surrounding vicinity and the so-called basilica of Damocratia in Demetrias date back to the 4th century.<sup>2</sup> However, the most vivid proof of the firm establishment of Christianity in Larisa, a Christian basilica, was not brought into light until very recently. Deriziotes, on the basis of the decoration of the mosaics that covered the narthex and the central aisle of the church, argued that it was completed at the end of the 4th or at the latest at the beginning of the 5th century.<sup>3</sup> Another basilica in Elassona that was built above the vaulted graves of distinguished local figures or martyrs who contributed to the prevalence of Christianity in the area, has been dated by Gallis to roughly the same period.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the continuous habitation of Larisa and the invasions that the town suffered through the centuries, do not permit us to get a clearer view of its ecclesiastical life. The basilica that was situated on the acropolis of the town (it was linked with the cult of St. Achilleios as we shall see further down) and dated to the 6th or 7th century, is the only religious building which belongs to the period under consideration. It was found totally ruined and the only evidence that attested its existence were some mosaics and the foundations.

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<sup>1</sup> Skylitzes, 330

<sup>2</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 41

<sup>3</sup> Deriziotes, *'Ktismata'*, 203-204

<sup>4</sup> Gallis, *'Mia Palaiochristianike basilike'*, 17-21

Although the archaeological remains seem insufficient to give us information about the ecclesiastical history of the town, the variety of the literary sources and the official acts we have at our disposal reveal to a considerable extent the important role which Larisa played as the most eminent ecclesiastical centre of Thessaly.

For the whole of the Protobyzantine period, the prefecture of Thessaly was under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Pope in Rome, although the West Roman State ceased to control that area already from the end of the 4th century. The head of the church of Illyricum (the Pope's vicar) was the archbishop of Thessalonica who, after the Justinianic ecclesiastical reforms on Illyricum (529, 545), exercised only a nominal authority over the Greek provinces of the diocese and was being increasingly controlled by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople or the emperor himself.<sup>5</sup> Every time the Patriarch's intervention became oppressive, the Thessalian bishops preferred to appeal directly to the Pope and not to the Macedonian see which was no longer capable of standing up for their interests. In this context, Thessaly emerges as a region where the jurisdictions of the Pope and the Patriarch were confused. The two ecclesiastical powers often appear to be in a fierce competition, with the Pope struggling, in a defensive role to keep at bay the interventions of the Second Rome.

In 531, in Constantinople, a minority of Thessalian bishops challenged the election of Stephanos as metropolitan of Larisa and finally succeeded in convincing the Patriarch to depose him. Stephanos lodged an appeal complaining about the irregularities that took place during the process of his deposition and the Pope was too keen to convene a council (known as *Collectio Thessalonicensis*) with the purpose of confirming his rights over the Vicariate, and contesting the Patriarchal claims in areas under his jurisdiction.

In 536 and at Justinian's suggestion Pope Agapetos was apparently forced to accept as metropolitan of Larisa Achilleios, since the Patriarch had already ordained him for this position.<sup>6</sup> The influence of Rome in Thessaly declined more and more after

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<sup>5</sup> Pietri, *'La Géographie', Villes*, 50-51

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 52

Vigilius' recantation of the Three Chapters and the Slav invasions in Greece. Taking into account the letters which Gregory sent to his metropolitans in Illyricum it was not before 592 that the Pontifical see was able to impose its shadowy authority over the area once more. According to these letters, Pope Gregory having received serious grievances by bishop Adrianos, appeared determined to restore the lost order. He reinstated Adrianos to his bishopric in Thebes and imposed exemplary punishments on the metropolitan of Larisa (John) and the archbishop of Justiniana Prima who had cunningly fabricated his deposition.<sup>7</sup>

The ecclesiastical dependence of Larisa on the Pontifical see was maintained until the period of the Isaurian emperors. In 732/733 Leo III brought all the Illyrian diocese together with Thessaly under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate as a retaliation for the Pope's obstinate refusal to share his iconoclastic views. It was during the course of the 8th century that Larisa, a Christian centre, and headquarters of the local administration, was raised to metropolitan status. According to the Notitia 2, an Episcopal list that was dated by Darrouzes to the same century, the archbishop of Larisa (he preserved the title which he used to bear before the absorption of Illyricum by the Patriarchate) occupied the 40th place in the metropolitan hierarchy. He was cited in conjunction with the archbishop of Athens as the Ecclesiastical head of Greece although the same title was also attributed to the bishop of Aegina.<sup>8</sup> We do not know however the exact number of bishoprics which Larisa had under its jurisdiction on the period of its nomination as metropolis.

In the following Notitia (3) Larisa appears as the head of eighteen bishoprics. Avramea commenting on the lists which comprise the Notitia maintains that they reflect earlier ecclesiastical conditions and that they consist on their own a useful geographical reference.<sup>9</sup> However, given their derivation from the problematic codex 1555 A from Paris, their reliability as Darrouzes has shown is open to question. They can be dated back to the 9th century possibly and certainly after 787 and their resemblance to the

<sup>7</sup> Pope Gregory *registrum epistolarum*, *MGH. Epistolae*, iii 6, iii 7, iii 38

<sup>8</sup> Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 217-218

<sup>9</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 48



Synekdemos of Hierocles is so striking that we can suggest that they constitute a simple repetition, with only the exception of Dios and Pyktos.<sup>10</sup> Larisa is mentioned as the metropolis of 'Thessalia Secunda', a peculiar title which causes further confusion concerning the reliability of the *Notitia* as we know that this title could not be used before the beginning of the 9th century when the theme of Thessalonika was created and the town was nominated as metropolis of 'Thessalia Prima'.

In the *Notitiae* 5 and 6 which can be roughly dated to the end of the 9th century, the metropolitan of Larisa was ranked in the 43th and 45th place respectively.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, only a few years later Larisa climbed in a spectacular way to the 34th place. This emerges from the Diatyposis of Leo VI, a list that was evidently drawn up between 901-907, i.e. during the first Patriarchate of Nicholas I. The bishoprics which came under the metropolitan of Larisa were those of Demetrias, Pharsala, Thaumakos, Ezeros, Loidoriki, Trikke, Echinós, Kolydros and Stagoi. From the nine suffragan bishoprics only those of Pharsala, Thaumakos and Ezeros belonged to the immediate region of Larisa. The raising of Neai Patrai to metropolis did not seem to have caused any problems to Larisa which kept all its 9th century bishoprics apart from the ones which initially declined and then vanished under the Slav pressure (Thebes, Gomfoi, Metropolis, Saltoumioni, Saltouborge, Kaisareia, Diocletianoupolis, Pyktos). It must also be noted that Larisa extended its ecclesiastical influence over Phokis as it included amongst its dependent bishoprics Loidoriki, a town which does not appear as a Thessalian place-name either in the Middle Ages or in the contemporary period.<sup>12</sup>

During the course of the 10th century, the metropolitan see of Larisa was relegated to the 36th place, but well before its end, it regained its previous status with exactly the same bishoprics as in the Diatyposis. Nevertheless, it certainly suffered territorial losses after the creation of the archbishopric of Pharsala which was the head of a newly created homonymous ecclesiastical province (eparchia).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 32; Hierocles, *Synekdemos*, 16

<sup>11</sup> Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 265, 268

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 284

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 291, 292, 304

A new decrease of the ecclesiastical territory of Larisa was to come at the beginning of the 11th century. In 1018, and after the restoration of the Byzantine power in Bulgaria, Basil II granted by a sigillion (1020) an extended authority to the Bulgarian church: the newly appointed archbishop of Ochrida obtained authority over thirty diocesan bishops and Stagoi was one of the bishoprics that were attached to the new diocese.<sup>14</sup> It was some time later and certainly before the middle of the 11th century that Larisa managed not only to regain Stagoi but also to extend its ecclesiastical jurisdiction remarkably. It comprised thirty suffragan bishoprics that extended to modern Pieria in the north (Kolydros), to the region of Pindos in the West (Litza) to Phokis in the south (Loidoriki) and to the island of Skopelos in the East.<sup>15</sup>

Of these, the towns of Kallindos and Viaina have not been identified yet while Gianopoulos' identification of Katria with Kastri by the lake Karla is rather problematic.<sup>16</sup> Special mention should be made here for the bishoprics of Radobisdio and Patsounas place-names which show very close phonetical similarities with Radovisidon and Pazi respectively, two villages which according to one reading of the *Partitio Romaniae* belonged to the *pertinentia of Petrion*.<sup>17</sup> Avramea, having initially placed Petria in Eastern Thessaly on the basis of a reference by John Tzetzes comes to contradict herself by identifying Radobisdio with a location called 'Radosivou' situated close to Elassona, as recorded in a document issued in favour of the monastery of Olympiotissa in 1336.<sup>18</sup> In her argument she is also followed by Koder-Hild.<sup>19</sup> Another bishopric which has not been identified by Avramea in her list of the Thessalian bishoprics, is that of Kapoulia. <sup>20</sup> The mention of a certain Damianos bishop of Kapoua and Phanari at the end of the 14th century leads us to place Kapoulia south of Trikala and across the river Pleres.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gelzer, *Texte*, 46

<sup>15</sup> Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 326-327, 339

<sup>16</sup> Giannopoulos, *Katalogoi*, 204

<sup>17</sup> Carile, *Partitio*, 286

<sup>18</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 174-180

<sup>19</sup> Koder, *TH 12* (1987), 85

<sup>20</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 174-180

<sup>21</sup> Koder, *TH 12* (1987), 56

In the 11th century always Pharsala ceased to be an archbishopric and came under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Larisa again holding the second place after Demetrias. Amongst the bishoprics that fell within the scope of the ecclesiastical authority of Larisa, these of Vounaina, Vesaina, Domeniko, and Charmena appear for the first time. Domeniko was one of the two bishoprics north of Larisa and came to cover the ecclesiastical needs of the population around Ellassona, a town which probably bore the brunt of the Slavic settlements in Thessaly, and gradually declined. After its mention by Procopius in the 6th century the only source which confirms the existence of the town is the De daemonibus operatione in the course of the 12th century.<sup>22</sup> Vesaina and Charmaina were situated on Ossa and the latter was very closely connected to the patriarchal monastery of Marmariane, dependent on Larisa from the end of the 12th century.<sup>23</sup> Avramea identifies the monastery of Marmariane with Marmaritzana, a bishopric that was initially under the jurisdiction of Neai Patrai in the Diatyposis of Leo VI and then incorporated in the metropolis of Larisa. However this is an error, firstly because Marmaritzio, as Hild maintains should be placed in the upper valley of Spercheios due to its geographical proximity with Neai Patrai and secondly because in the Episcopal lists of the beginning of the 11th century (Notitia 10) we have two different entries: Marmaritzio, under the metropolitan of Larisa (still unidentified) and Marmaritzana under the metropolitan of Neai Patrai.<sup>24</sup>

Later, in the seventies of the 11th century, the ecclesiastical province of Larisa was split and Pharsala was once more ecclesiastically independent. Moreover, during the course of the 12th century the number of the bishoprics dependent on Larisa started shrinking, (18 during the reign of Manuel Komnenos, 15 just before the Frankish occupation) a phenomenon which complied with the poverty of the provinces due to their exploitation from Constantinople.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Gautier, *'De Daemonibus'*, 130

<sup>23</sup> Dölger, *Regesten*, no. 1626, 1807. 1808: *MM*, i, 85-88

<sup>24</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 178; Hild, *TH*, 12 (1987), 75; Darrouzes, *Notitiae*, 332, 339

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 346, 363, 375

The names of twenty-three bishops of Larisa have been preserved.<sup>26</sup> They are known through their mention in letters (especially those which the Popes or Patriarchs addressed to them), their participation and consequently their signatures in local or Ecumenical Councils, their mention in the literary sources (Strategikon of Kekaumenos, Life of St. Nikolaos of Vounaina) as well as through the seals they used to execute the documents they were issuing.

### **B.The Appearance of the Bogomil Sect**

The spread of Bogomilism in the region of Larisa can be attested by two different sources both chronologically and artistically. Before we examine them it is useful to refer briefly to this dualist heresy. The beginnings of the movement which first appeared in Bulgaria go back to the end of the 10th century. The head of the heresy, Pop Bogomil (contemporary with the Tsar Peter) was preaching that the world was governed by two opposite forces (God and his inferior Satanael) and that prosperity or disaster depended entirely on the outcome of their battle. His views caused great sensation in the poverty stricken Bulgaria of the time, and they were soon transplanted to Byzantium.<sup>27</sup>

The first of our sources, the Dialogus de daemonum operatione which was possibly composed during the 12th century had been traditionally attributed to Psellos. However and as Gautier skilfully showed the exact identity of the author remains a rather impossible task.<sup>28</sup>  $\Theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi$ , a military official who participates in the dialogue testifies to the existence of the sect in Elassona: a native of the town had, by virtue of his possession by the demons, the ability of prophesizing to his comrades his arrest by  $\Theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi$ , the persecution of their religion and the uprooting of their worship. He was also able to describe  $\Theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi$  before he could even see him. After his repeated refusals to reveal to  $\Theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi$  the source of his supernatural powers, he was finally forced to admit

<sup>26</sup> Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 191-195

<sup>27</sup> Obolensky, *Bogomils*, 168-229; Paraskevopoulou, *Aspects*, 95-126

<sup>28</sup> Obolensky, *Bogomils*, 183; Gautier, *'De Daemonibus'*, 128-131

that he had acquired them after his meeting with a rascal of Libyan origin. The description of his introduction into the secrets of demonology is described with hair-raising details.

During a night the Libyan led him to a mountain, ordered him to taste a certain herb, vomited into his mouth and finally covered his eyes with some ointment. Immediately, a throng of demons appeared to his imagination one of which took the shape of a crow and entered into his mouth. From that day onwards he was able to prophesy on a permanent basis with the exception of Holy Week and the day of the Resurrection.<sup>29</sup> The belief in demons, however is totally incompatible with the physical-spiritual austerity of the Bogomils who certainly were not Satanists. Therefore the nature of the text leads us to conclude that either the author intended to slander the Bogomil heresy or he was describing the convictions of another group of heretics and possibly the Massalians. Additionally, as Obolensky has argued the author had no direct contact with the heretics and probably wrote from hearsay or rumour.<sup>30</sup> No matter how credible the details of the incident are, the mere fact that a military official was dispatched to Elassona to arrest the ring-leaders of the heresy, highlights the spread of Bogomilism in Thessaly before the end of the 12th century and the state's concern to preserve the orthodox faith of its subjects.

Our second source is the letter itself which patriarch Cosmas (1075-1081) sent to the metropolitan of Larisa. In this letter, directed against the heretics, he placed an anathema on "Pope Bogomil who under Peter emperor of Bulgaria, had welcomed this Manichaeian heresy and spread it in Bulgaria."<sup>31</sup> In total, twelve anathemas were to be read in the Parish Churches on Sundays and feasts against the Bogomil dogmas, their supporters and their confederates. The anathemas, as Gouillard remarks, constituted a warning for the faithful and an official renunciation of Bogomilism.<sup>32</sup> The metropolitan was finally instructed to take personal interest in the catechism and the

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<sup>29</sup> Gautier, *op.cit.*, 160-161

<sup>30</sup> Obolensky, *Bogomils*, 184

<sup>31</sup> Gouillard, *'Une source grecque'*, 371-372

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 362

salvation of the heretics. We are not however, in position to know whether the letter was sent to other metropolitans of the West where the heresy had spread, being thus an encyclical letter or it was specifically addressed to the metropolitan of Larisa. Although this point remains obscure, our source attests the vigorous presence of Bogomils in the region of Larisa during a period that the emperor Alexios was making every possible effort for the removal of the Bogomil threat.

During the seventies of the 12th century the existence of five Bogomil churches in the extended Balkan territory -one of them, the *Ecclesia Melenguiae* was situated in the Peloponnese- confirms the obstinate perseverance of Bogomil pockets against the state's persecutions, as a result, as Angold points out, of provincial non-conformity.<sup>33</sup>

### C. The Cult of St. Achilleios

The religious life of Larisa was intimately connected to St. Achilleios, its first legendary metropolitan and patron-Saint. The influence which his cult exercised on the local population is confirmed by the two versions of his Life (preserved in the codex 212 of the Athonite monastery of Dionysiou with minor discrepancies between them) and the *Kanones* and *Akolouthiae* (they were read in the Church for his commemoration) historically interesting liturgical texts which are nevertheless chronologically very distant from the events they describe.

According to the original Life, St. Achilleios was born in Cappadocia. At a very early age he lost his parents and distributed his property to the poor. Afterwards he visited the Holy Places and Rome before he arrived at Thessaly where he was ordained bishop of Larisa with the solid vote of the bishops of the adjacent areas. His reputation as a distinguished prelate reached Constantine the Great who invited him very soon to participate in the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (325).<sup>34</sup> There he bravely confronted Areios and overwhelmed the heretics with his arguments and with a miracle

<sup>33</sup> Obolensky, '*Papas Niketas*', 491-492; Angold, *Byzantine empire*, 89

<sup>34</sup> However he is not recorded in the official lists of the Council



he performed. After the end of the Council he was again present in Constantinople at the dedication ceremony of the city where he met an old bishop called Metrophanes and received his blessings. Having received lavish imperial gifts he returned to his flock in Larisa.

The last part of the *Life* shows great interest. Having acquired the divine charisma to foretell his death he called some stone curvers (*λιθοξόοι*) whom he ordered to prepare a reliquary (*λάβρακα*) for the burial of his body. He gave the last admonitions to his flock and he surrendered his spirit to God after a metropolitan tenure of thirty five years (so his death can be safely placed between 360-365). The reliquary of the Saint soon became a source of miraculous healing for the suffering population but at a certain time was, for unknown reasons, forgotten by the Larisaeans and remained hidden under the ground for three hundred years. It was revealed in the 10th of February of unidentified year and only after the appearance of divine signs. From then onwards it regained its previous significance as a renowned shrine and healing centre.<sup>35</sup>

However the transcription of the original *Life* -dated in the middle of the 13th century- does not make any mention of the above cited chronological details, refers to the incident in a very general way and justifies the hiding of the reliquary as a response to the imminent threat of being vandalised by the hands of sacrilegious persons (*ἵνα μὴ βεβήλων τούτου χεῖρες ἐφάπτωνται*).<sup>36</sup> This minor differentiation consisted a burning issue which has engaged the attention of modern scholars. Gouloulis has argued that as the author of the transcription of *St. Achilleios' Life* was writing at a very late stage, he got confused by the obscure extract and considered the period of the three hundred years, during which the reliquary remained buried, as an exaggeration. The solution which Gouloulis proposes is based on the idea that the 13th century transcription was an evolution of the original *Life* and that the two texts report -apart from the bulk of their content- two chronologically distant events. Putting too much

<sup>35</sup> Sofianos, 'Agiōs Achilleios', 135-147

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 148-172

emphasis on the word "*βεβήλων*" contained in the transcription, he suggests that there was a second, deliberate this time, hiding of the holy relics as a result of the concern of the local Church to secure them against the Iconoclasts, apparently during the reign of Constantine V (741-775).<sup>37</sup>

His argument though interesting at first sight, is proved to be wrong after some consideration. Firstly, because he uses as a totally credible and independent source a transcription that was compiled nine centuries after St. Achilleios death and four after the putative Iconoclastic threat to the holy relics. Secondly, because if such a threat really existed, by no means would the author of the original *Life* have failed to mention it. The author, Joseph the Hymnographer, compiled the *Life* and the *Kanon*, with the intention to commemorate the recent disclosure of the holy reliquary and the restarting of its miraculous healing. He lived during the 9th century and apparently witnessed the reactivation of St. Achilleios cult in Larisa visiting the town on his way to Constantinople in the end of 842 just a year before the definite prevalence of the Iconophile policy.<sup>38</sup> A possible hiding of the relics due to Constantine V 's harsh iconoclastic policy was a very recent event and therefore it would have been recorded with all the possible details drawn, if not from his personal knowledge, at least from the preservation of the local tradition.

Undoubtedly, the evidence provided by the *Life* is insufficient to give us a reasonable explanation for the three hundred-year period of oblivion of St. Achilleios' reliquary. It is also impossible to accept that the Larisaeans ceased to commemorate their patron-saint for such a long period. It is therefore tempting to believe that Joseph possibly meant that during this period the Larisaeans were unable to worship freely Achilleios and to celebrate with all the established customs the translation of his relics in the streets of the town. Relics represented the physical *praesentia* of the Saint in the earthly community and the access to his influence and patronage demanded that he would be present in their midst, and not confined in a distant and unknown grave.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gouloulis, 'Taphos', 229, 234, 239

<sup>38</sup> Sofianos, 'Agios Achilleios', 103

<sup>39</sup> Hunt, 'Relics', 176

Our hypothesis may be further corroborated by the archaeological evidence; the basilica that was excavated in the acropolis of Larisa and dated by Deriziotes in the 6th -7th centuries is believed to be the church that was built upon the tomb of St. Achilleios. An inscription that was found very close to it tells us: *καί τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον... Ἀχιλλεῖου ἀρχιεπισκόπου* (this too is the work... of the Archbishop Achilleios).<sup>40</sup> In spite of Risos' reservations we can identify the person of our inscription with Achilleios, the archbishop of Larisa mentioned in a letter of Pope Agapetos in 535.<sup>41</sup>

The dating of the construction of the basilica during the episcopate of Achilleios seems capable of giving a reasonable explanation to our historical problem: the tomb of St. Achilleios remained until the 530's inadequately protected being either uncovered or covered by a jerry-built ecclesiastical building. At this point the archbishop Achilleios ordered the building of the basilica on the occasion of his election by the Patriarch and with the intention to commemorate his namesake and patron Saint of Larisa. His decision can be explained by his concern to provide a safe shelter to the holy tomb in the eve of the 'Dark Ages'. It is additionally in absolute accordance with the religious building activity attested in Greece in the course of the 6th century.<sup>42</sup> The Slavs, as we have already seen, were firmly established in the Balkans and in 540 they attempted their first descent in Greece passing through Thessaly and besieging without success Thermopylai. Their continuous invasions and subsequent settlements in the vicinity of Larisa did not result in the capture of the town; they nevertheless hindered the normal evolution of ecclesiastical life in the region and rendered almost impossible the devout worship of St. Achilleios. The critical character of the decades that were to follow and the initiation of Iconoclast policies from 720 onwards suppressed the religious feeling of the local population that was expressed freely only in 842 with the absolute pacification of the Slavs, the restoration of icons and the reactivation of St. Achilleios

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<sup>40</sup> Deriziotes, *'Ktismata'*, 202

<sup>41</sup> Risos, *'Vlachs of Larisa'*, 204; Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 192

<sup>42</sup> Two basilicas in Thebes and the Basilica of St. Demetrios in Thessalonica have been dated to the first quarter of the 6th century; Avramea, *Byzantine Thessaly*, 153; Spieser, *Thessalonique*, 211

cult. Walter has additionally argued that the interest in relics was especially intense after the triumph of Orthodoxy in 843.<sup>43</sup> Thus it is not accidental that the decade of the 840's fits perfectly with the three hundred years of the oblivion of the Saint's reliquary, recorded by the Life. We should also notice at this point that the reactivation of the Christian orthodox cult in Larisa was dictated by the need of the local administration to domesticate the Slavs, win them over as tax-payers and integrate them as full members of the local society.

Gouloulis has rightly detected the close links between the cults of St. Demetrios and St. Achilleios; these links stemmed from their function as legendary figures who facilitated the repulse and the subsequent conversion of the Slavs, from the ability of their tombs to produce holy oil, and from the relief provided to their worshippers through the miracles they executed.<sup>44</sup> The Miracles of St. Demetrios refer to the meeting of the two Saints in Tempe after the capture of Thessalonica by the Arabs in 904, and the Life of St. Nikolaos of Vounaina records that after Euphimianos (dux of Thessalonica) lost his hope of being cured by St. Demetrios he resorted to the tomb of St. Achilleios in Larisa.<sup>45</sup> It is also interesting to notice that the churches built to commemorate the two Saints were completed at roughly the same chronological framework and more particularly during the decade 525-535. Their construction can be taken as a token of a new period of prosperity that can be attested in Greece proper and certainly in Macedonia a few years before Justinian's ascension to the throne.<sup>46</sup>

The shrine of St. Achilleios was rapidly rendered one of the most important Christian centres in Greece and attracted a great number of pilgrims. At the end of the 9th century the founders of the monastery of Soumela, Saints Barnabas and Sofronios visited the holy tomb on their way to Pontos.<sup>47</sup> According to the legendary (synaxarion) of St. Phantinos, the Saint starting his travel from Athens stopped at

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<sup>43</sup> Walter, *Art and Ritual*, 145

<sup>44</sup> Gouloulis, 'Taphos', 237-238

<sup>45</sup> PG, 116, 1389-1392; Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 146

<sup>46</sup> Spieser, *Thessalonique*, 211-213

<sup>47</sup> Gouloulis, 'Taphos', 224

Larisa and paid tribute to the holy relics.<sup>48</sup> It was exactly this extended reputation of the Saint's tomb that attracted the Bulgars of Samuel in the last quarter of the century. Samuel's perseverance to capture the town may have been dictated not only by political and territorial but also by purely religious considerations. The ten-year siege of Larisa eventually took the character of a 'holy war' between Christians as the Bulgarian king was anxious to establish his empire on firm Christian grounds and thus to win the sympathy of the Roman citizens. Taking the town, he captured a large number of citizens, but showed the traditional respect for the relics of a renowned Saint. Samuel did not destroy the church and tomb of St. Achilleios and left a part of the Saints' relics and the holy reliquary untouched, a fact that is attested by the transcription of the Life and three Kanones dating from the 11th to 16th centuries.<sup>49</sup> The best part of the relics though was transferred to a small island in lake Prespa where a magnificent church was consecrated in his name. The cult of St. Achilleios was very soon transplanted to the Vlacho-Bulgarian and Slav population of Bulgaria and constituted a symbol of their liberation from the Byzantine yoke.<sup>50</sup>

No matter how severe was the blow that the religious life of Larisa suffered the cult of St. Achilleios did not lose its impetus and influence amongst the local population in the centuries to follow. The fact that the seals of Leo and Basil metropolitans of Larisa in the 11th and 12th centuries respectively, depict the figure of St. Achilleios, suggest that his active cult was never abandoned.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Delehay, *Synaxarium*, 224

<sup>49</sup> Sofianos, '*Agios Achilleios*', 111

<sup>50</sup> Gouloulis, *Taphos*, 238, no. 131; Risos, '*Vlachs of Larisa*', 206

<sup>51</sup> Laurent, *Sceaux*, no. 674-676

#### D. Monasticism in the Region of Larisa

The spiritual movement of monasticism in the region of Larisa was intimately connected to the 'mountain of Kellia', a region that was extended along the east side of Ossa from Stomio-Karitsa in the north to Melivoia in the south. Apart from the literary sources, this identification of the mountain of Kellia is necessitated from and justified by the great number of the monastic remains that have been traced in the same region.<sup>52</sup>

The history of Kellia may be dated back at least to the last quarter of the 9th century when the Athonite brothers Symeon and Theodoros visited the mountain "with the purpose of preaching and encouraging the monks and hermits of this place to the collective zeal of piety".<sup>53</sup> Their visit should be viewed in the context of the State's attempt to reorganise the church (after the turbulent period of the Dark Ages) and introduce to the hermits the monastic life as an alternative way of approaching God. The efforts of the two missionaries were crowned with success as only a few years later Sts. Varnavas and Sophronios, founders of the monastery of Soumela in Pontos, stopped at Kellia on their way from Athens and received the teaching and blessing of a venerable old man called Pachomios. Pachomios -the first mentioned Kelliotes - possessed prophetic abilities and, judging by the Life of the two Saints, he was in charge of a small monastic community, centred around a *kyriakon* (monastery church) a place where he regularly performed the services.<sup>54</sup> A number of ascetics is also attested at the mountain of Melouna (next to Tyrnavos) at the beginning of the 10th century. The Life of St. Nikolaos of Vounaina informs us that a physical environment consisting of dense forests and abundant water secured the tranquillity so necessary for hermits.<sup>55</sup>

In the subsequent centuries Kellia must have received a great number of visitors while the number of monks that became permanent residents of the mountain was on

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<sup>52</sup> Gouloulis, *'Oros'*, 482-484

<sup>53</sup> Anagnostakes, *Symeon and Theodoros*, 83

<sup>54</sup> Gouloulis, *'Oros'*, 485-489

<sup>55</sup> Sofianos, *Agios Nikolaos*, 141



the increase. In March of 1083, Alexios on his way to Larisa definitely visited Kellia and met its monks. His wish to bring them under the spiritual leadership of Hosios Christodulos of Patmos five years later can not be explained otherwise. Alexios should have heard about the austere way of life that Christodulos was leading and wanted him to apply to the Kelliotai his strict rules as they are described in the *Oros* or *Kanones* included in the Typicon of Kellia. John of Rhodes, the biographer of Christodulos has preserved in the form of a vivid dialogue the details of the meeting which took place in Constantinople between the emperor, Christodulos, and a delegation of monks of Kellia.<sup>56</sup> Christodulos had traced problems stemming mainly from the absence of an effective organisation-administration and of a solid coenobitic life. The monks of Kellia denied to accept the strict rules that were to be imposed on them, on the grounds of their previous autonomy from any secular and ecclesiastical power and of their idiorrhhythmic way of life and requested from the emperor to permit them to keep enjoying their existing status.

The Kelliotai did not want to fall under a well-defined system of administrative rules that bore striking similarities with the organisation of Mount Athos (appointment of a *protos*, definition of the relation of the monastic community with the state and church, boundaries of the various monastic institutions within the Holy mountain, productive activities, relations with the laity, etc.). In the long run, the pattern that was followed in Kellia was that of a shadowy dependence on the state and acknowledgement of its legal ownership since it developed in areas that belonged to it. This state of relative autonomy -with the exception of some form of dependence on the metropolitan of Larisa- seemed to have been preserved even under Frankish occupation given that the community was not obliged to pay taxes.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Voines, *Vios Osiou Christodoulou*, 123-125; Vranousi, *Agiologika Keimena*, 128-139

<sup>57</sup> Gouloulis, *'Oros'*, 495-496

## EPILOGUE

The problems posed by the research on the history and historical geography of Byzantine Larisa up to 1204 aimed at the investigation of the area and the presence of the local population in different chronological stages.

However, the gathering of safe conclusions concerning the relationship between the population and the area, the social structure, and the economic and social functions proved to be an arduous task. Therefore, only some speculations were made here on the basis of the general tendencies that prevailed in the empire and of the scrutiny of the few sources we had at our disposal.

The town of Larisa, capital of the administrative entity of Thessaly appears to have survived from the main Slav invasions of 587/8 and 614/5. Nevertheless, the normal way of life was seriously interrupted as a result of a large number of Slavs who settled in the fertile Thessalian plain and disorganised the local Byzantine administration. It was a long time after the foundation of the theme of Hellas in the last decade of the 7th century that these Slavs came to constitute an integral part of the local society after their hellenisation and Christianisation.

After the passing of the Dark Ages the demilitarisation of provincial society and the intensification of the agricultural production contributed to the formation of a distinct social group that very soon managed to impose its authority in a local level mainly because it accumulated the bulk of the landed property in the area. New towns make their appearance during the 9th century as a result of the economic prosperity that is widely attested throughout the empire. However in the course of the 10th century the Arab presence in the Aegean sea, the Slav invasion of 904, the depredations of Symeon's Bulgars and finally the siege and capture of Larisa by Samuel, brought the town to its knees.

In the 11th century Larisa and its vicinity comes to constitute a part of Hellas-Peloponnesos. The establishment of the peace after the subjugation of the Bulgars in 1018 permitted the town to enjoy a new period of prosperity but the unwillingness of

the local population to tolerate the hard fiscal policy of Basil II's successors culminates in the revolt of 1066. Only fifteen years later the town attracted afresh the interest of the Normans who intended to make it their headquarters in their attempt to occupy the rest of Greece.

In the 12th century we can notice the splitting of Thessaly into smaller administrative entities the most important of which were situated in the eastern part. Thessaly accepted the Frankish rule without offering any opposition and thus the procedure of its political detachment from the main body of the Empire was concluded.

## Abbreviations

<b>BCH</b>	<i>Bulletin de correspondance Hellenique</i>
<b>BF</b>	<i>Byzantinische Forschungen</i>
<b>BSA</b>	<i>Annual of the British School at Athens</i>
<b>Byz</b>	<i>Byzantion</i>
<b>CFHB</b>	<i>Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae</i>
<b>CSHB</b>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae</i>
<b>DOP</b>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<b>PG</b>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<b>PL</b>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<b>REB</b>	<i>Revue des Études Byzantines</i>
<b>TH</b>	<i>Θεσσαλικὸ Ἡμερολόγιον</i>
<b>TM</b>	<i>Travaux et Mémoires</i>
<b>Villes</b>	<i>Villes et Peuplement dans l'Illyricum Protobyzantin, Rome</i>

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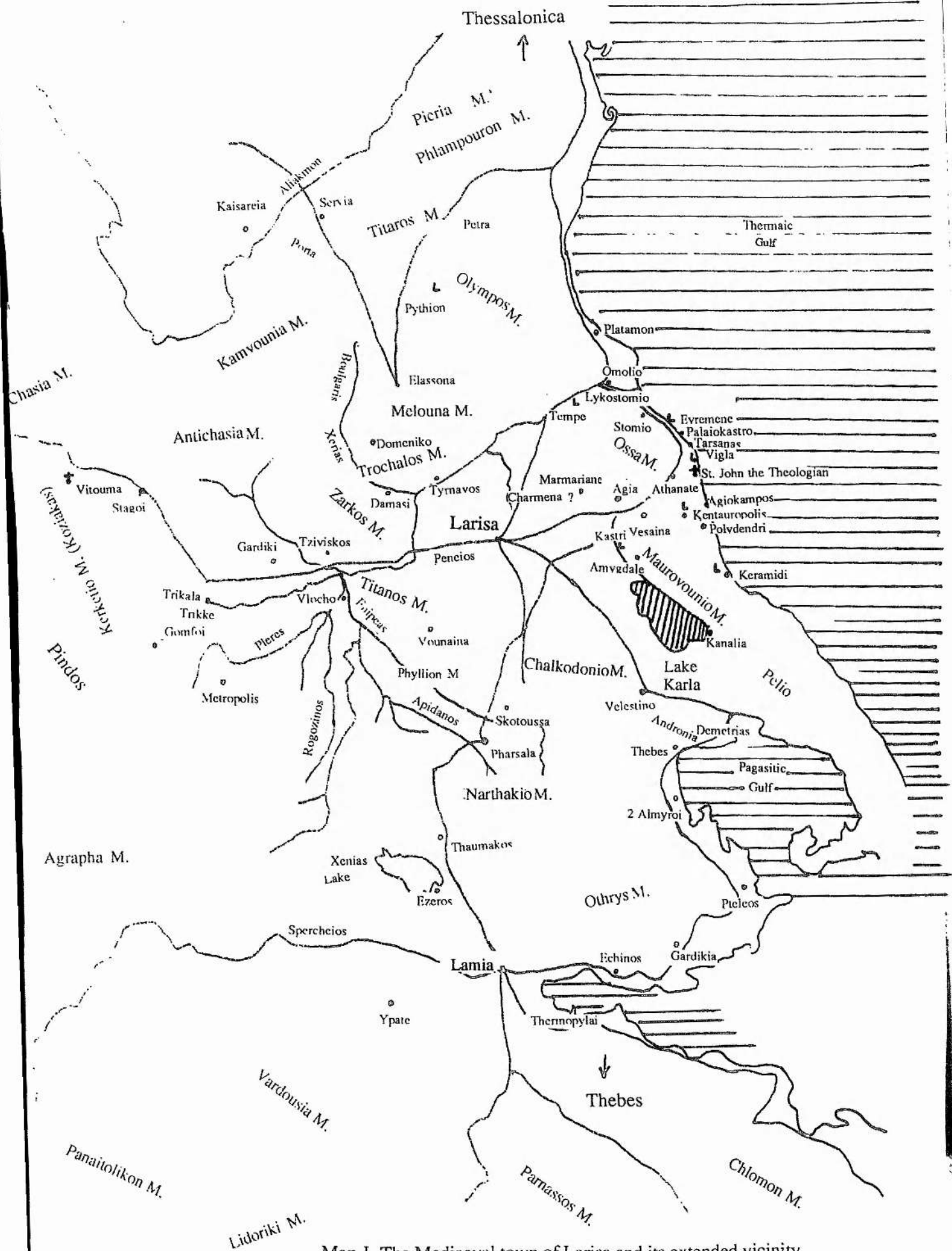
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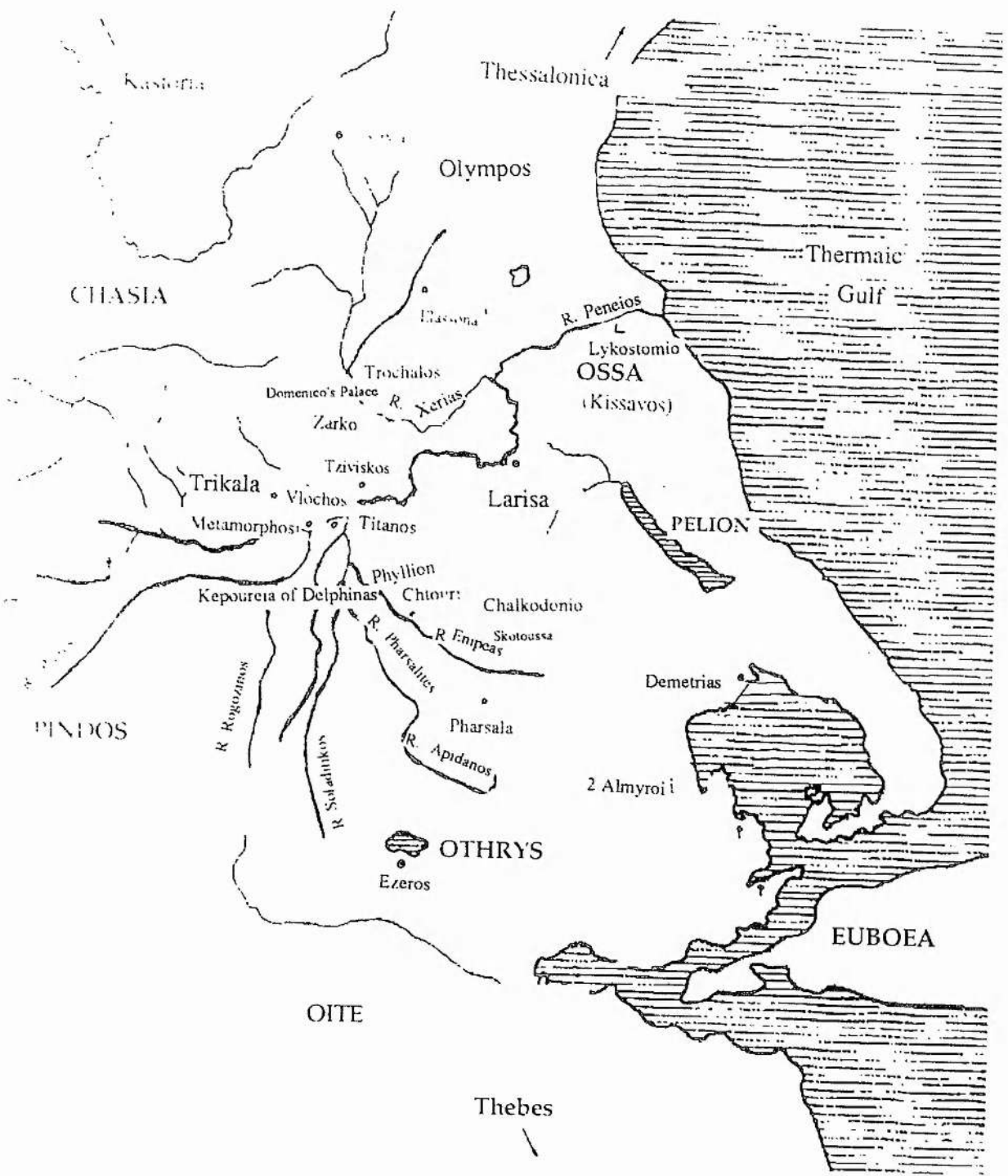
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Map I. The Mediaeval town of Larisa and its extended vicinity

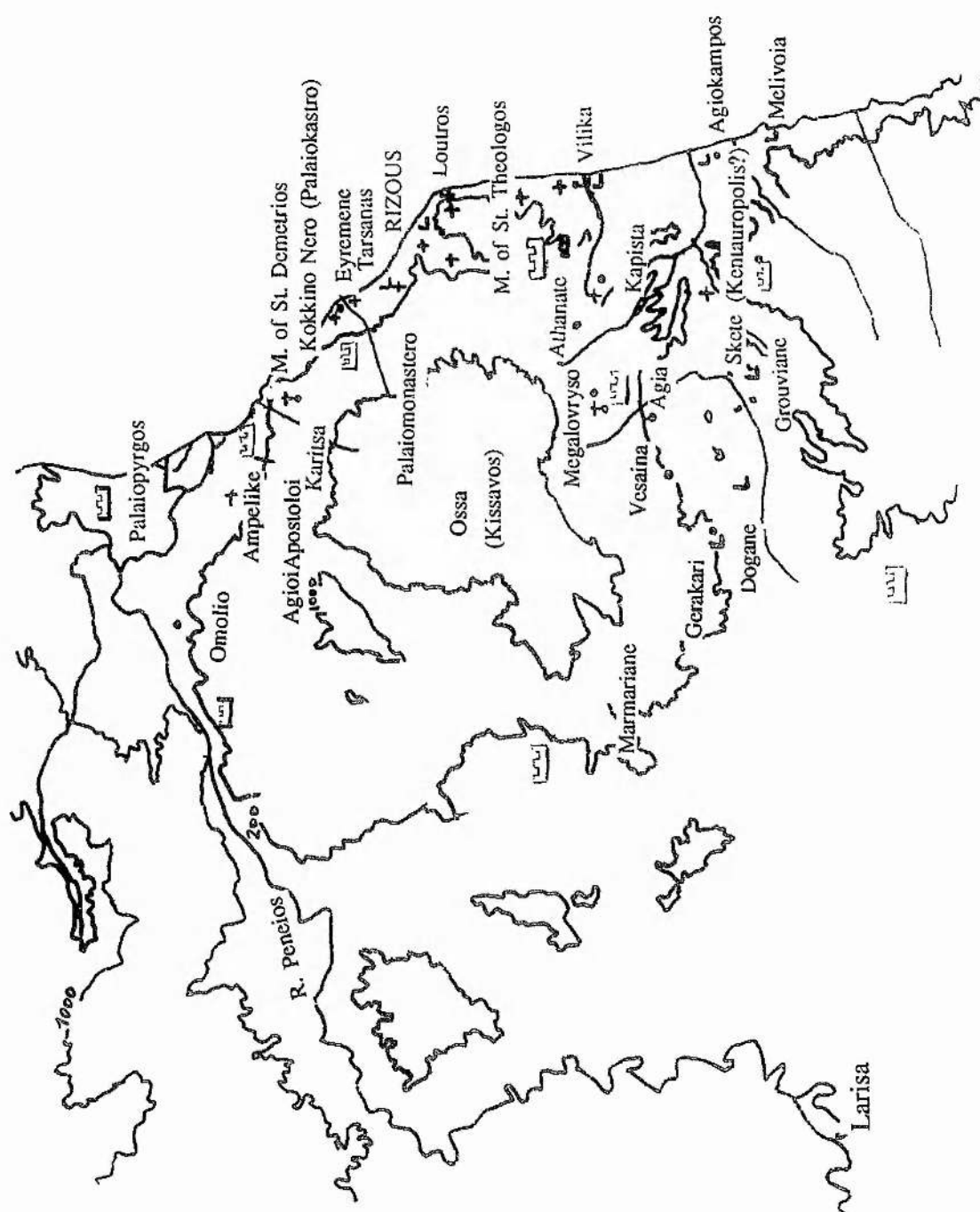


Map II. The region around the valley of Enipeus





Map III. Alexios' march to the region of Larisa



Map IV. Ecclesiastical buildings and monastic presence in the mountain of Kellia